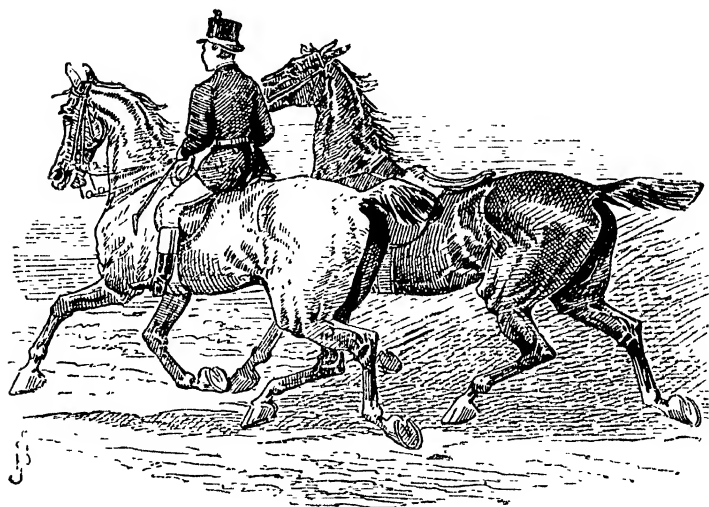


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SKETCHES
IN
THE HUNTING FIELD

BY
ALFRED E. T. WATSON



WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOHN STURGESS

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TO
HIS GRACE
THE DUKE OF BEAUFORT,
K.G., ETC., ETC.

WITH GRATEFUL REMEMBRANCES OF
PLEASANT DAYS IN THE BADMINTON COUNTRY,

This Book
IS DEDICATED

BY
THE AUTHOR.

PREFACE.

SOME of the "Sketches" which follow appear for the first time; others have been altered and amended; but the greater portion of the book consists of reprint, and for the issue of such works critics have taught us that explanations, if not absolute apologies, are required. I proceed therefore to offer my excuses.'

For the last year I have been the Editor of the *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, to which periodical, before I accepted the position, several of the "Sketches" had been contributed under the signature "Rapier;" and after I had undertaken the editorship, a pleasant feature of my letter-box consisted of correspondence from kindly readers who expressed a wish to see more of these papers, asked whether they would be issued in book form, and offered friendly suggestions and criticisms. Slight and unpretentious as the "Sketches" were, it was agreeably obvious to me that some people had been amused by them; and when that admirable draughtsman, Mr. John Sturgess, told me he should be glad to depict some of the scenes described as they

appeared to his mind, I determined on sending the papers forth in a book. I hope that some of their old friends will welcome them, and that they may meet with new friends in their new shape.

A few words about the papers themselves. They are for the most part sketches from life with embellishments; but in only two or three instances do the names given to the characters point in the slightest degree to their real identity. Some of the "Sketches" are records of more or less eventful days with the hounds. Most of the anecdotes related are matters of fact.

I have to return thanks to the Editor of the *Standard* and to the Proprietor of the *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, for permission to republish what has appeared in the columns of their journals.

I will not venture to say that I trust those who take up this volume may enjoy reading, as much as I have enjoyed writing, these reminiscences. I will only hope that they may now and then in imagination be sufficiently interested to gallop over a few fields with me, and enjoy the fun.

A. E. T. W.

CONTENTS:

	Page
I. THE M.F.H.	1
II. A CITY "HUNTING MAN"	10
III. A YOUNG HUNTING LADY	19
IV. AN ENGLISH FARMER	33
V. A STRAIGHT RIDER	42
VI. AN UNLUCKY SPORTSMAN	52
VII. A SOCIAL PROBLEM	63
VIII. A "SWELL"	73
IX. AN M.F.H.—ANOTHER VARIETY	82
X. A WRANGLER	92
XI. AN AFTER-DINNER SPORTSMAN	101
XII. THE DEALER.	110
XIII. THROWN OUT	122
XIV. A GENTLEWOMAN.	134
XV. A HUNTSMAN	141
XVI. THE FIRST MEET OF THE S— HOUNDS	156
XVII. "SEASONABLE WEATHER"	169

SKETCHES

IN

THE HUNTING FIELD.

I.

THE M.F.H.

SINCE the days of Nimrod—very likely before, if we only had record of it—mankind in all known countries has delighted to hunt. The earliest Greek figures show men sitting so well down on their horses that one cannot doubt the Greek equivalent for “Gone away!” has been yelled by some enthusiastic sportsmen, and that the artists intended to represent them as in full swing after something or other. The “oiled and curled Assyrian bulls”—if any poet of the time ventured so to speak of the golden youth who were scandalised at the proceedings of Semiramis—assuredly had those clumsy-looking beards of theirs blown about in the ardour of the chase; and what was King Arthur doing when he ought to have been looking after—

“bandit earls and caitiff knights,
Assassins, and all flyers from the hand
Of Justice, and whatever loathes a law”?

We know where he was, together with Prince Geraint, who also had pressing calls to his own domains. They—

“listened for the distant hunt,
And chiefly for the baying of Cavall,
King Arthur’s hound of deepest mouth ;”

and Queen Guinevere knew what she was about, and gave Geraint her opinion as to the spot where the pack was most likely to “break covert.”

Before the Lord who had sport with old Christopher Sly the tinker thought of his supper, he charged his huntsman to “tender well his hounds” and discussed their qualities at length ; and much as Theseus was in love, even just before his marriage he could not forget his hounds, but went hunting, and grew enthusiastic in his description of their breed and excellence, telling Hippolyta how they were “crook-kneed and dew-lapped, like Thessalian bulls ; slow in pursuit,” he admitted, “but matched in mouth like bells.”

Knowing youths of the present day may hint doubts as to whether Nimrod and his friends would have held their own in a quick twenty minutes over Leicestershire pastures ; for to them oxers and posts and rails were of course unknown, and the country could not have been much enclosed.

We may as well generously give them the benefit of the doubt, however. Probably they had something in the nature of water-jumping occasionally, and very likely the best of them would have got over the Whissendine

more than creditably. So the name of the mighty hunter must be revered by all those who love the turf, both the long straight, up which gaily clad jockeys finish, and the fields diversified by hedges and ditches over which we show the way when circumstances are favourable and all is going well.

For "since all in Adam first began," as Matt. Prior sings, a good many must have continued on through Nimrod, and the immortal grandson of Ham was the archetype of several illustrious personages who live and flourish in the present day. Such an one is the M.F.H., whom we will call the Marquis of Wiltshire. Here, however, the attempt to draw exact parallels must cease. That Lord Wiltshire would have distinguished himself in any position or capacity, every one who has the pleasure of his acquaintance must feel convinced; and it is easy to suppose that his predecessor would have become equally famous had he been born so many thousands of years later than he was.

We may assume that Nimrod would, like his descendant, have been made a K.G., the acknowledged leader of society in the wide district over which his influence extended, and the bestower of a hunt "button," to receive which would have been at once a recognition of good-fellowship and of skill and courage in the field.

Such an one is the Marquis. Listened to with respect and attention when he speaks in the Upper House alike upon political or agricultural topics, an authority upon

artistic questions, a *causcur* who adds a special charm to the dinner-table over which he presides with such genial hospitality, his Lordship is never so much at home, so thoroughly satisfied with himself and the world in general, as when seated in his saddle listening for the repetition of the note which proclaims that Wanton's suspicions are correct and that Woldsman heartily agrees with him.

Lord Wiltshire first came to hunt in the same way that ducks first came to swim or swallows to fly—by the promptings of nature; and as an inborn knowledge aids the efforts of these bipeds to make their own way in the world, so did it enable the Marquis to make his way across country by the aid of his pony. His sires had done the same before him, as pictures from the hands of many painters of various periods give evidence on the walls of his hall; and with, at times, remarkable success, as trophies of the chase, abnormally huge or curiously coloured masks, a splendid dog-fox and a ferocious wolf* which have found their last homes in plate-glass cases, together with other emblems of triumphant woodcraft, abundantly testify.

In those early days his contemporaries protest—and grow very angry with you if you don't believe it—that the hounds knew the brave boy who, clad in his little green, gold-laced coat, sat his pony so firmly and easily, and, by some mysterious instinct, recognised in him the embryo M.F.H. who would cheer on their descendants

* The result of a visit to the Pyrenean district.

to so many victories. But these eulogists take no account of long mornings on the flags when, seated with dangling legs on his chair, and armed with a miniature hunting-crop, the hounds were introduced to him, and he was taught to appreciate their points ; with a success now to be traced in the brilliant pack which represent their handsome and accomplished parents.

The late Lord Fitzhardinge cared nothing for the looks of his hounds if they could hunt, and complained that "huntsmen forget to breed hounds for their noses," declaring that he only wanted "a pack that would kill foxes." But the æsthetic side of the question was never lost sight of in the Wiltshire kennels, and while not forgetting to breed hounds for their noses, the authorities have taken care that external good qualities were not overlooked.

Time passed on. The bright little pony had been exchanged for a cob, and the cob in turn for a horse—you may see his picture there over the fireplace in the billiard-room—and by degrees careful observation had taught the diligent student how to handle hounds, the best way to aid them in difficulties, together with the no less important lesson when to leave them alone to help themselves by their own intelligence. It will be generally conceded that the ideal M.F.H. should thoroughly know his hounds and be able to hunt them on an emergency ; for we have all heard what happened in the Handley Cross Hunt when the committee of management which preceded Mr. Jorrocks had dis-

charged the faithful Peter for "stealing off with the hounds" before all the members of the august little body had been duly informed of the circumstance that the fox had been viewed away, and were quite ready to start off after him.

The dignity of M.F.H. is extremely tempting for many reasons to many men; but it is only in the eyes of the Master himself that this dignity seems to be retained when he is sitting on his horse at the side of a covert which has been drawn blank, without a suggestion to make as to future proceedings, or a reason to give why he should or should not accept the advice proffered by his huntsman.

These sketches are by no means personal portraits, albeit the outlines may at times be taken from life; and it is necessary, therefore, to be careful lest accumulating details should mark out too closely the identity of more or less familiar characters. Many readers, however, will call to mind cases in which wealth, vanity, and ambition have been the sole qualifications possessed by a M.F.H. Too ignorant of the whole subject of hunting to help himself, and too conceited to appear to be at the mercy of his huntsman by accepting his views, the prominent members of the hunt, friends of the Master, seize every opportunity of expressing their several and diverse opinions.

The men, therefore, pass the time in wrangling and snubbing each other instead of in trying to kill foxes; and the hounds sit on their sterns, with upturned faces,

strongly expressive of canine contempt, ardently longing to be drafted off to a country where things are differently managed.

It is needless to say that in the Marquis of Wiltshire's country nothing of this sort has been heard of from time immemorial. The hunt know that a perfect knowledge of woodcraft, together with an absolute genius for the "noble science," direct the governance of the chase, and they are too good sportsmen not to comprehend their luck; to say nothing of personal esteem and regard for their leader.

A long time has passed since Lord Wiltshire was called upon to give proof of the good account to which he had turned the lessons learnt on the backs of the pony and the cob. One day, for reasons which it is not necessary to detail, the well-mounted field found themselves with an excellent pack, three efficient whips, a master, and no huntsman; and the question arose, who is going to hunt the hounds? "I will," exclaimed the Marquis: and the patience, skill, and cunning with which a wily fox was killed close upon three hours afterwards established for his Lordship a reputation which has ever since continued to increase.

This was long ago. Since then many years have fled to what the versifier, eagerly searching for some sporting metaphor, has called

"The stables where Time's steeds are stalled
When they have run their races;
Whence never one was e'er recall'd—
Eheu ! anni fugaces !"

The weight of many hunting seasons, and twinges of an hereditary complaint which sometimes keeps him fretting from the saddle, prevent the noble M.F.H. from leading the van, slipping over those awkward stone walls which occur so frequently in some parts of his country, and charging those big black bullfinches which diminish fields so materially in others, as he did in the brave days of yore. But if any one wants to see a run he cannot do better than—cannot do half so well as to—keep one eye on the Marquis of Wiltshire, and note where his splendid weight-carrier is bearing him; for if the fox had sketched out a little plan of his intentions, and laid it on the Master's plate at breakfast-time, he could hardly be more fully cognizant of what the little beast was doing at any given time, and was going to do next.

Now and then, of course, a difficulty has to be surmounted and a fence jumped, on which occasions Lord Wiltshire still invariably arrives on the other side with punctuality and dispatch. Nor has his early agility altogether departed, and it is probably with something in the nature of a mild malediction on his own awkwardness that a young gentleman recalls a little incident that happened last season—how, coming to a gate with an obstinate lock which necessitated dismounting, he bungled about stopping his horse, and suffered the Marquis to slide from his saddle and perform a task which assuredly devolved upon the younger cavalier; a proof, however, of the ready kindness and

courtesy which mark Lord Wiltshire in all relations of life.

The greeting which comes from all assembled as the M.F.H. drives up and bestrides the noble beast appointed for first horse, shows the stranger unmistakably in what estimation he is held, and that it is not rank nor wealth, but personal regard which draws forth the smile of welcome. For all, too, he has a cheery word; and that in every respect, servants, stables, and kennels, something very nearly approaching to perfection is attained by the care and unrivalled experience of the M.F.H., will readily be understood. So the Marquis of Wiltshire's Hunt remains a social institution of weight and influence, and a model of how English sport should be pursued. To his Lordship we may gaily drink "*Floreat Scientia*," with a sure knowledge that in his district, at any rate, the aspiration is, and will be, thoroughly fulfilled.

II.

A CITY "HUNTING MAN."

BY far the most horsey and stabley man with whom I have the pleasure of an acquaintance is Mr. Thomas Checkley, the junior partner in the old-established firm of Countington, Checkley, & Company, who are described by admiring friends as the "eminent haberdashers" of Cannon Street.

Everything connected with Checkley's personal decoration and immediate surroundings is of the horse, horsey. His watch-chain is a model in steel and gold of a patent bit, and if his pin is not a horse-shoe, it is a jockey's cap and whip, a spur, or a miniature copy of some article from a saddler's shop. His house in Bayswater, whither I penetrated on one occasion to make inquiries about a horse he wanted to sell, was furnished, so far as it came under my ken, with suggestions of the stable and the chase.

His inkstand is a horse's shoe; a pair of stirrup irons forms his pen-rack, his paper-weight is a fallen horse, in bronze, with the jockey standing by him; and a silver-mounted shoe, this time inverted, forms a receptacle for his cigar-ash. A regular trophy of whips and

spurs—nearly enough to supply the whole hunt of which he is a member—is arranged over his mantelpiece; catalogues of sales of various kinds of horses, with, in many cases, the sums they fetched written against their names in pencils, strew his study; and in a prominent place is an ivory tablet with a blank space in the middle surrounded by highly coloured pictures of the covert side, horses, men, and hounds, and with the days of the week neatly printed, against which in the hunting season Checkley never fails to write down the list of impending meets.

It need hardly be said that sporting pictures cover the walls of his rooms, and the passages leading thereto, and that sketches of many men on many horses jumping many fences may be noted in perspective up the staircase by the observant visitor. He himself, always in boots and breeches and mounted on various steeds, is a favourite subject in oil, water-colours, and photographs—large ones.

The only poet for whose works he cares a straw is Somerville, excepting indeed Major Whyte-Melville, from whom he has taken his favourite quotation.

“ Down in the hollow there, sluggish and idle
Runs the dark stream where the willow-trees grow;
Harden your heart, and catch hold of your bridle.—
Steady him—rouse him—and over we go!”

run the lines which he considers the finest in the language, and which indeed have a dash and swing about them that may commend the verse to the man

who has been in the position of the imaginary hero.

Beckford has of course a place on his shelves; all the "Druid's" books are there, together with the "Science of Fox-hunting" by Scrutator, "Horses and Hounds" and "Recollections of a Fox-hunter" by the same author, Cecil's "Hunting Tours," and well-nigh innumerable "Hints on Breeding and Training," "Horse-keepers' Guides," and other manuals of similar character. "Handley Cross," "Mr. Sponge's Sporting Tour," "Mr. Romford's Hounds," and the rest of Mr. Surtees' books are the only novels allowed a place in his library, with the exception of a couple of volumes by the gallant writer whose verse is quoted above, and a collection of sketches by the "Gentleman in Black."

Little need be said about the cut of Checkley's coat and trousers, for everybody will at once understand that the former is modelled after the severest order of hunting men's attire, and that the latter garments are cord in material and tight in fit. Piles of *Bell's Life* continue to accumulate in the corner of his study, and of illustrated papers the *Sporting and Dramatic News* is in his estimation without a rival, the only weakness about it being a tendency to give undue prominence to the drama at the expense of sport. He wants, for instance, more details of particular packs, and thinks that if members of various hunts could be persuaded to send in accounts of runs the journal would be perfect.

A slight literary achievement describing a run with the South Wessex, detailing how "among those well up throughout, despite the awkward line of country traversed, we recognised Mr. Thomas Checkley on his gallant bay, Pytchley," &c., did not find its way to the dignity of print, and perhaps this may account for Checkley's complaint. The "Member of the Hunt" by whom the account was written omitted to send his name, and possibly the suspicion which points to the rider of the gallant bay itself may be unfounded.

All things about him, indeed, proclaim Checkley to be a hunting man, and so he is; but, as everyone knows who has been with hounds five minutes after they have got well away on a hot scent, the verb to hunt is wonderfully elastic, and of wide significance; and the one place where Checkley's enthusiasm wanes, and, like Bob Acres' courage, oozes out, is when mounted on his gallant bay, Pytchley, or any other of his stud, and landed in a field with a locked gate on the side beyond which hounds are running.

Theoretically, Checkley is a superb rider. Over timber he is especially hard to beat—in the smoking-room after dinner—and it is quite a treat to hear him dilate upon the ease with which the highest posts and rails may be crossed if you only sit well back and hold your horse together before his effort and after he has landed on the other side.

Water bothers him sometimes—even in the aforesaid smoking-room. This he confesses; hinting, however,

that the fault is generally with the horse, for he rides animals which he believes to be as nearly as possible thoroughbred, and quotes Dick Christian, to the effect that thoroughbred horses are nearly always frightened of water, though they jump it beautifully when they get used to it.

His stud has never got quite used to it yet.

How Checkley came to be so well up on his gallant bay, Pytchley, on the occasion of the famous run of the South Wessex just referred to, is a mystery to those who have watched his mode of progression in the field. The line of country traversed that day had certainly been a stiff one, and few lived to the end of it. The tongue of malice and uncharitableness, of course, suggests that it was an accident; that Checkley, having ridden boldly through a gate into a field with a gapless fence on the far side, had, after carefully inspecting the formidable obstacle, turned his horse's head and ridden boldly through the gate out of the field again; had taken to the road, and was quietly trotting home when he came upon the hounds, which had been running in a semi-circle along the base of which he had ridden; so that all Checkley and the gallant bay did was to trot through a gate, and join in with the half-dozen or so who had ridden the line, and who, jumping their last fence, found Checkley already on the spot.

There he was, however, and after all that is the great thing. Perhaps it was his superior knowledge of woodcraft that enabled him to see the finish on that ex-

citing day ; for woodcraft, a comprehensive knowledge of the laws which govern scent (how few of us really know anything at all about it, and how often our theories are upset!), together with an instinctive feeling of certainty as to what the fox will do, are, Checkley believes, among his strongest points.

Thus, when a whiff of the scent has drawn a faint cry from Tuneable, when the rest of the pack have gradually joined in the acknowledgment till the covert rings with melody, when at last the twanging horn and a delighted yell of "Gorn awa-a-a-ay!" has merged into a chorus of "For-ard ! for-ard ! Tally-ho !" when eager spirits have charged the first fence and got well on to the second, Checkley's instinctive feeling usually comes to the surface with considerable force.

Steeple-chasing is capital fun in its way, he admits, but it isn't hunting as the Duke of Beaufort and Lord Wilton understand the word. Oddly enough, too, at this moment the subject on which he is usually so eloquent, the pleasure of seeing hounds work, suddenly loses its interest. All his thoughts are now bent on discovering the line the fox is going to take ; and it is a very remarkable circumstance that he never can be persuaded that the fox is likely to take a line which leads him over a jump.

Wherever the coast is clear of obstacles, and gates are common objects of the landscape, will assuredly bring him, Checkley feels sure, to the spot for which the fox is pointing.

What humbugs we are, some of us—many of us—most of us, probably, about something or other, all of us I fear, occasionally! In spite of being constantly thrown out by taking Checkley's lead, and heeding his prophetic utterances and opinions, a little knot of men will always be found to follow him through the paths of peace where a line of gates conducts to safety, and if a fence has to be crossed, it is at a gentle pace through a gap, and not with a rush, over a stiff binder or two.

This latter style of jumping Checkley enjoys in his pictures, vicariously, and rigorously abstains from practising. "Paid sixpence for catching my horse," would never form an item in his table of expenditure, if he kept one, as it did so frequently in the list of the immortal Mr. Jorrocks' disbursements, for he never ventures to cross anything that can possibly bring about a spill.

A broken-down hurdle, which the horse can walk through, if he doesn't care about jumping it, is the limit of his daring, and when such a "fence" has been surmounted, it is grand to note the manner in which he looks back to his friends, as his horse canters along, and shouts, "Come on—it's all right!" as if he had burst his way through a thick black bullfinch, and wished to let other adventurous spirits know that it was negotiable.

And it is just as well that Checkley does not tempt fate in the matter of fences. Theoretically, again, no one knows the points of a hunter better than he. His

eloquence on the subject of good shoulders, of the absolute necessity for shoulder action as opposed to knee action, and the impossibility of a horse staying over a deep country, unless his shoulders are so placed that the weight of his foreparts are thrown upon the hind limbs, &c., &c., &c., is untiring. He has views—very strong ones—on the question of a hunter's feet, even to the number of nails that should be put into his shoes; and on wide hips, muscular quarters, straight, clean, flat legs, he is oracular.

Yet with all this wisdom on the matter, the fact remains that his steeds are, for the most part, the veriest crocks, and I am inclined to think that some cunning dealer must have found out the many weak places in poor Checkley's superficial knowledge of horse-flesh, and, by fooling his customer to the top of his bent, is able to palm off upon him for good prices screws which are unsaleable elsewhere.

There can be little doubt, in fact, that Checkley is in a mortal "funk" when he gets on a horse. Even when he sees his way safely out of a field by an open gate, or a very flat gap, he always finds something to cause him uneasiness. In grass land there may be rabbit holes; in plough, there are flints to get in his horse's feet; he constantly fears that he has cast a shoe, or that something or other is somewhere wrong, and threatens immediate danger.

Why then, it may be asked, does he hunt? He does not enjoy it; his doctors do not specially recommend it;

his partners disapprove of it; his wife dreads the casualties which seem so likely to occur when her lord is—as she imagines—flying recklessly over gates and hedges, with now and then a casual haystack or so. He does not seek for “gibbey sticks,” like Mr. Jogglebury Crowdley; and, in short, the question is extremely difficult to answer.

I suppose it amuses him and gratifies some small vanity to pose as a hunting man; and as, with muddy boots and splashed breeches, he leans back in his seat in the train which takes him to Charing Cross, looking as much as possible as though he had been performing feats which an admiring country would not willingly let die, he is for the time—at least he looks—perfectly happy.



III.

A YOUNG HUNTING LADY.

IF Kitty Trewson were to express her candid and decided opinion, supposing that modesty did not stand in the way of frankness, she would admit that she considers her presence at the covert-side one of the great attractions which give distinction to the Meadowmere Hounds; that the day she first came out hunting will ever be held as blessed in the annals of the chase, and that when from any unavoidable cause she is absent from the meet, a gloom falls upon the assembly, and the business of the day is entered upon with a feeling of grave depression.

This is Miss Kitty's view of the subject, I am convinced, but it is not very generally entertained by members of the hunt at large; in fact, it is hardly too much to say that Miss Kitty is regarded as an unmitigated nuisance; and on those occasions when she is hung up in a thick fence, or dropped gently into an oozy ditch, an unholy smile lights up the countenances of those cavaliers who, without appearing rude or neglectful, can escape the task of rescuing her from her distressing predicament.

This will seem very ungallant, perhaps very selfish, to those who have not suffered at Miss Kitty's hands; but, having chosen her for the subject of this sketch, the truth must be written about her—for truth is great and will prevail, and if we said we were delighted to see Miss Kitty come out hunting it would simply be encouraging Satan.

Old Trewson—"Squire" Trewson—is not by any means a bad old fellow. He votes blue, generally manages to have a fox in his coverts, is liberal in his subscriptions to deserving objects, and entertains the young soldiers from the nearest garrison even to the extent of finding a mount for them. When he does those things which he ought not to do, the slips are unintentional; for Trewson is new to the part of "Squire" which it now delights him to adopt, and his growth hardly favours his present development.

Trewson sprung from the City, was bedded out in the neighbourhood of Russell Square, transplanted to the Bayswater district, and only bloomed and flowered as "Squire" late in life. What induced him to come and live in the country, and study the part of a country gentleman, it would be difficult to say. The facts that he did so, and does so, remain; and hence Miss Kitty's introduction to Meadowmere.

Her early studies in horse-flesh must have been drawn from the beasts that dragged omnibuses past her father's shop; and her knowledge of pace can only have been gained from the speed of the animal in the

"growler" which took her occasionally to the play. A jobbed brougham marked the latter part of Russell-square neighbourhood experiences, but at Bayswater papa kept his own carriage horses, and Kitty—a high-spirited and courageous girl, to give her what is her due—studied the equestrian art upon the back of one of these.

The Englishman's natural love of horses is no doubt equally implanted in the breasts of Englishwomen, and soon comes into prominence when the disposition is sufficiently bold to give it way. It is easy, therefore, to imagine how Miss Kitty must have felt when, watching from her window which commands a byway leading to the high road, she saw the first symptoms of a hunting day: a man in pink trotting along, and playfully tapping his horse's shoulder with his hunting-crop, whereat the animal, quite entering into his rider's feelings, affects to be indignant and alarmed; item, a couple of grooms with led horses, the stirrup irons pulled up to the top of the leather; item, three jolly farmers jogging on together and chatting cheerily; item, a well-mounted man in black, riding to overtake a couple more pink coats; item, three more pinks, well stained and weather-worn, on stout, serviceable hunters, in charge of eighteen couple of hounds and a little white fox-terrier.

"Oh, papa, do come and look at these dear dogs!" cried Miss Kitty. "Can't we get some?"

"We'll see, my dear," her indulgent father replied,

for he would have given his daughter a slice of the moon had he been able to procure it for money; and from that time forth there was no peace until she was permitted to make the dear dogs' closer acquaintance.

Old Trewson had never been on a horse in his life, and did not propose to begin galloping about the country at his age and with his figure. But money can do most things. A steady-going old hunter was procured for Miss Kitty, and she was allowed to go out under the charge of an amiable neighbour, an old gentleman who hunted because his doctor ordered it—hunting, as he understood, or at any rate practised it, consisting of jogging to the meet on a sleepy cob, eating sandwiches and drinking sherry until the hounds got away, cantering slowly along at the extreme end of the ruck, after having carefully folded up the remaining sandwiches, screwed on the top of the flask, and stowed his luncheon away.

The cob was never in a hurry to start, and apparently regarded the horses and hounds, his companions of the chase, with feelings of supreme indifference, faintly tinged with contempt.

If hounds ran straight they were soon out of sight, and the cob turned his head towards home with anything but reluctance; if they did not disappear speedily the noble sportsman cantered or trotted after them until he came to an obstacle through which the cob could not walk without making some sort of effort in the nature of a jump, when the day's run was voted over, and they

returned by the path they had come, stopping by the way to empty the flask and finish the sandwiches.

Whether the old gentleman derived much benefit from his sporting expeditions need not be considered in the present sketch, but even to Miss Kitty's unsophisticated nature it soon became evident that this was not the genuine thing.

Kitty, I may take this opportunity of remarking, is by no means an unattractive girl, and looks especially neat when her figure is displayed by a fairly well-fitting habit, while her cheeks are rosy and her eyes bright from the effects of exercise, and her abundant black-brown hair is bundled up so as to tilt her hat rather over her forehead, whereby an aspect of considerable knowingness is imparted to her; for every observant man is aware that the widest variation of expression may be obtained by different methods of wearing a hat. It is difficult, to the verge of impossibility, to look fierce, dignified, or wise, with the hat on the back of the head at an acute angle with the line of the nose, and far from easy to avoid an appearance of rakishness if the head-gear be put on so as to slant over the ear. Probably Miss Kitty was not unacquainted with these scientific facts, and acted accordingly.

Her riding is not now all that it might be as regards seat, albeit much better than it was in that not unimportant condition of equestrianism—remaining in the saddle; but as regards hands, so far as riding goes, Kitty has none. In these early days, however, we were

rather glad to have Kitty with us, for a pretty girl cantering along the grass by the roadside contributes a pleasant feature to that essentially English scene, the "Way to the Meet," and adds greatly, moreover, to the spectacle of the covert-side, always supposing that her nose does not become too red nor her cheeks too blue from the effects of an unflattering northerly wind.

One day, however, when Kitty, with her guide, philosopher, and friend, was scouring the plain in a very gentle and unambitious manner, and when he, indeed, was trotting gently down the fence to look for the gate, young Scatterly on one of the big Irish horses with which he is always going to win a steeplechase came thundering past, straight to the comfortable jump before him, a thinnish moderate-sized hedge, with a ditch on the landing-side.

Kitty certainly did not mean to go, but her old hunter did. Fired by the spirit of emulation, and remembering old days when he was not condemned to the society of an obese cob, but kept his place not far from the best of them, his usual placability of temperament was for the moment upset; so, wheeling round, he jumped to the side of Scatterly's horse, and galloped on with him.

"My dear! my dear! stop him!" her temporary guardian cried out, while his cob looked on with wonder and disdain at his late companion's evident desire to make quite unnecessary exertions for his own private



I CAN'T—STOP!—WA—Y!—WHO—A!" CRIED POOR KITTY.

amusement and satisfaction. Kitty desired nothing better than to "stop him," but this was easier said than done, and he clearly proposed to have his jump.

"I can't—stop!—wa-y!—who-a!" cried poor Kitty, tugging hard at the reins as her steed put down his head, and galloped on.

"It's all right, pray don't be frightened; give him his head, and sit well back," were Scatterly's rapidly spoken injunctions, and, though very likely Kitty did not give him his head (feeling too much the comfort of something to hold on by, and not reflecting to what extent she inconvenienced her animal), she sat back and set her lips tightly as her experienced mount slackened his pace and prepared for his effort.

Scatterly's big horse took the obstacle almost in his stride. At the same moment over came Kitty with a crash, and, though landing well on her horse's neck, got back into her saddle, and succeeded in stopping in the middle of the field—a deep plough. Scatterly, too, reined in to express his fears that he had startled her horse, and to compliment her on her courage and judgment, a check which occurred at this moment enabling him to perform this act of grace without the suffering he would have experienced had he lost his place.

Up came also the cob, snorting indignantly, for his usually patient owner, in terror lest evil might befall his charge, had hurried him over the plough by means of the dog-whip he always carried but rarely used; and up came also Miss Kitty's groom, who had been dis-

porting himself in another direction. Two or three men who knew the Trewsons likewise approached to hear the story and offer congratulations on her escape from the danger, whatever it might have been, and compliments on her riding, which were especially welcome to their recipient.

Altogether Miss Kitty was decidedly pleased with the adventure. She had made her way over a decent-sized jump, and had found the operation a great deal easier than she had imagined. With the convenient crutch to a saddle a fence is in fact infinitely easier to the wearer of the habit than to him who grasps a saddle—or tries to—with boots and breeches; and Kitty, persuaded with much facility that she had done something wonderful, was so little alarmed that she determined to have another try—at rather a smaller fence next time, perhaps—when an occasion offered.

Such occasions will offer in the hunting field if a person seeks for them, and not unfrequently if he or she does not.

Satisfied with the laurels she had won on the day marked by these exciting occurrences, Miss Kitty resigned herself contentedly again to the companionship of the cob, whose owner cast many glances at the “nasty vicious brute,” which had now relapsed into perfect placidity, and expressed his intention of urging upon Trewson the necessity of getting rid of such a “dangerous animal.”

But this parting was not brought about, and the very

A YOUNG HUNTING LADY.

next time was the last that Miss Kitty accompanied her quondam guide.

We did not get away on this morning, or rather on this afternoon, until after a tedious delay and a wearisome journey through several coverts with corresponding waits outside, and soon after the welcome "Tally-ho!" was heard the pair found themselves in a large field with no perceptible way out. They had come in by means of a very flat gap, which seemed to have vanished, and the easiest apparent outlet was over a hurdle. The cob and his master alike regarded as ridiculous such a proceeding as jumping; but those seductive pink coats were still in sight. Miss Kitty's horse, though tractable, gave symptoms of impatience, and, disdaining to ride round the field again in search of the gap, she proclaimed her inclination to try the hurdle.

Her old friend was somewhat apt to be didactic, as Miss Kitty was to be impatient, and before he could formulate the reasons which induced him to caution her against such a proceeding, and adduce examples of persons who had shattered themselves in divers ways by such rash exploits, Miss Kitty affected to assume that he was coming, and with an "I'll go first, shall I?" negotiated the hurdle with considerable ease.

She did not knock her nose this time, and only deranged the position of her hat sufficiently to convince her of the wisdom of Scatterly's injunction to "sit well back;" and now felt justified in taking her place in the ruck which forms the main body of most hunting fields.

So for the rest of that day she waited her turn, and when it came, followed some twenty other people, and was followed by as many more.

After this, of course, Miss Kitty became more and more enamoured of hunting, and if there were anything she liked better than to hunt it was to talk about it. So far from the old hunter being sold, a younger comrade, a well-bred little bay, was added to her stable, and it is only when he is unusually fresh and she is, to put it plainly, rather afraid of him, that the Kitty of to-day is to be recognised as the pleasant, amiable girl of yore.

She is horsey without the slightest knowledge of horses, for practice has brought experience, experience confidence, and confidence only presumption. On the strength of an ability to sit on her steed over a light jump, Miss Kitty has subsided into a disagreeable imitation of Lady Gay Spanker; and the worst of it is that the misguided girl regards herself as the pride and glory of the hunt, believing that foxes and hounds are simply accessories to the display of her grace, courage, and skill.

A short account of Miss Kitty's proceedings the last time she favoured us with her company will make clear why it is that we love her so much better when she is at home.

The meet is at Spinnington Gorse, and business is just beginning, when up canters Kitty on her new horse Sultan, a yelp from Rattler, as she boldly gallops over him, announcing that he has either been kicked or very

near it. "I'm afraid I'm late?" she says apologetically, and proceeds to greet her friends; Sultan, who had been sent along at a good pace, blowing hard to get his wind.

Kitty surveys the scene, and perceives a big covert, bounded on one side by road, on another by farm buildings, on the side where we have taken up our stand by ploughed fields, and to the south by a wide expanse of park-like common leading across a splendid line of country over which a wiry fox has taken us more than once, and on which side it is more than probable he will break again. Kitty marks the turf. "Did he want a nice gallop, a poor little horse?" she murmurs caressingly. "Did he want to go very much? So he shall, then."

Sultan does not want to go, having been well blown already, but a kick from his mistress's spur sends him along; and when she has gone some three hundred yards the fox bounds out of covert just before her horse's nose, and as speedily bounds in again, his retreat being expedited by a cut aimed at him by Miss Kitty's whip. We look into each other's faces, thoughts too deep for utterance checking expression. Kitty is delighted.

"I've seen the fox!" she gleefully cries as she returns to us. "Oh, Sir Henry"—to the Master—"I've seen the fox; such a beauty! He was just coming out, and I drove him back again. Oh! he was such a splendid fellow!"

Sir Henry is the pink of politeness, and feels the

utter impossibility of giving vent to his feelings ; but his face is a study as he replies, " I'm afraid you have scarcely assisted us very much, then, Miss Trewson," and rides off.

"What's the matter with Sir Henry? he doesn't seem at all nice this morning," Kitty innocently asks an acquaintance.

"You headed the fox, didn't you?" he answers, hoping that the amiably spoken query will convey a reproof.

"Yes ; and I suppose he's vexed because he didn't see it?" she surmises.

"Perhaps that was it," he drily rejoins ; whereupon Kitty, with a dim perception, it may be, that she ought not to have had the fox all to herself, grows energetic. We are now in a ride in the covert. Old Ranger, the well-beloved hero of a clever pack, puts his wise old nose to the underwood, ponderingly and suspicious.

"Go and hunt, bad dog!" cries Kitty, "landing" him one with her restless whip, to the infinite surprise of Ranger, who looks up wondering what he has done to be beaten, and runs for an explanation to Bill Heigh, his friend and huntsman. "Please not to flog the hounds, Miss," he says, as he rides past, to Kitty, who looks very angry, and vows that he is an "ill-tempered, rude old thing."

In spite of Kitty, however, the fox is viewed away on his former line, and young Heathfield, who happens to be by her side, is just turning his horse's head towards

the fence out of the covert when Kitty's voice sounds in his ears: "Oh, Mr. Heathfield, I'm so sorry to trouble you, but *would* you please fasten my girths a little tighter for me? It's *so* good of you, but my groom *is* so stupid. Will that do? Are you sure it's fast now? Oh, thank you *so* much!"

It doesn't take poor Heathfield long to get on his horse and set him going; but everybody else who rides is well away over the next field, and it is not a benediction on Miss Kitty that the breeze wafts back as he gallops on. Kitty finds her way over somehow, and manages to reach a gate, which enables us to avoid an ugly trap, before most of us, whereat there is a lengthened pause until this clumsy Diana has quite convinced herself that she cannot open it. On we go, Kitty's screw, who has had one or two sharp bursts, already losing ground, when Scatterly, who has been rather thrown out by extra cleverness, comes up in a desperate hurry, but draws rein, for the hounds are hesitating a little and bending to the right.

"Oh, Mr. Scatterly," cries Kitty, "I'm so glad you are here! I'm sure we could jump that fence if you would pick out that nasty stick for me. Do you mind? I do so want to try!"

Scatterly, as courteous as all shy men are who are not used to ladies' society, dismounts, and is struggling to pick out a stiff binder, when, with a loud cry, away go the pack with one consent. By the time he has completed his task the hunt is a good half-mile away, for

the Sultan refuses, and Scatterly, with extreme good nature, waits to see her scramble over in a second attempt.

About half-way through the run Kitty finished in a pond. I don't know who fished her out, or which of the two it was who rode home with her; but altogether it will scarcely be a matter for surprise that we do not hail Miss Kitty's appearance with absolute enthusiasm.



IV.

AN ENGLISH FARMER.

As Tom Maizeley sits by the covert-side, talking with a respectful deference which has nothing of servility in it to his landlord, Sir Henry Akerton, he would feel extremely uncomfortable if he had the faintest idea that he was being included in a series of sketches designed for the amusement of known and unknown friends, who are united by a common interest in the chase.

Tom would laugh at the notion of being put in print; and when he does laugh it is not the mild spasm of hilarity, compounded of a smile and snigger, which sometimes does duty for laughter, but a peal which leaves you no room for doubt as to the integrity and power of his lungs.

Having so done justice to the novelty of the proceeding, Tom would, I suspect, feel awkward, and protest that there was nothing to say about a plain chap like him. Nor, perhaps, is Tom altogether wrong. There is nothing particular about him. He is only a steady-going, hard-headed, soft-hearted English farmer; but he is an excellent type of a class, and in a series of sketches of an English hunting field must necessarily

occupy a very prominent place, if such sketches are to be fairly comprehensive.

My opinion of Tom is by no means a universal one, and the very progressive Radical member, Mr. Marmaduke Jenks, who sits for the market-town where you may meet Tom any Friday morning, regards him as an ignorant boor, dissipated and dangerous; while Tom, on his side, stigmatises his friend as a "rum 'un."

Tom's creed is, in fact, very simple.

He is only anxious to do the best by the land he holds, to train up his son to follow in his grandfather's footsteps, to make his daughters fit wives for the young farmers, his son's contemporaries, to keep his dependants honest and comfortable, and, in short—the idea seems absurd in this grasping, discontented age—to do his duty in that station of life to which it has pleased God to call him. .

Tom's ignorance revealed itself conspicuously when he was invited to become a member of a Two Hundred who were to have the privilege of selecting Mr. Jenks as a fit and proper person to represent the agricultural interest in the House of Commons, an honour which Tom refused in terms unmistakeably decisive.

To his besotted mind, his landlord is his natural representative, and he looks on the sudden arrival of a stranger who does not own an acre in the county, and whose only claim to consideration is that he has edited a manual of political economy, as an impudent intrusion. He has heard Mr. Jenks hold forth on the tyranny of the

governing classes, the immorality of landowners, and has been promised that, if he will only support Mr. Jenks and urge his brother farmers to join with him, the tyrants will be made to tremble before the eloquence of Jenks, who has draughted a bill which will enable every farmer to become possessed, on easy terms—for next to nothing in fact—of the land he tills.

But all this fails to move sturdy Tom Maizeley. He doesn't want to make any one tremble, least of all his landlord, for whom he entertains a warm regard.

"He lets me the land for a fair rent, and I pay it when it comes due. The game isn't in my lease, and I don't want what doesn't belong to me."

Such is Tom's artless philosophy, and he has consequently been set down as an incorrigible dullard.

"I daresay he knows a lot," Tom said to a neighbour, as they jogged home after a lecture they had been induced to attend, wherein Mr. Jenks and some friends from London had painted their wretched condition to them, and after which he had distributed copies of his handbook, that they might refresh their minds when they got home. "I daresay he knows a lot; but it doesn't seem to make him very happy; and I reckon them that's most contented has the best sort of politics!"

How can you possibly reason with a man like this—a creature who deliberately refuses to understand that he ought to be miserable and dissatisfied? Jenks has given him up, and herein I think Jenks has done wisely.

As aforesaid, Tom is now talking to the oppressor ; and though the most elastic definitions of beauty will not include his face or figure, he is far from a disagreeable object to contemplate.

He is now nearer fifty than forty, though not much. His thick brown hair has only just the faintest tinge of grey here and there, and his whiskers are as yet free from that slight indication that he is not as young as he was : a fact of which he would be well-nigh unconscious were it not that his horses seem to labour rather more towards the end of the day than they used to do, and this sets their master thinking that the girth of his waist may have some influence on the peculiarity.

He wears brown tops, of course, and, equally of course, cord breeches, a dark tweed shooting jacket, and rough, low chimney-pot hat ; and these garments, with what they contain, together with a comfortable saddle, approach in weight almost as near to fifteen stone as they do to fourteen.

Tom, however, never had the slightest pretensions to being a brilliant rider. He does not jump if he can avoid it, and an extensive knowledge of the Meadowmere country enables him to find his way from point to point without bumping much in his substantial saddle.

He and his horses perfectly understand each other, and if Tom has to take his place with the main body of the field, who follow each other over a moderate jump, the business is managed without any unnecessary

exertion on either side. There is, fortunately for many of us, a way through, as well as over, most fences ; and Tom does not disdain to wait, in the case of timber, until some ambitious spirit has broken the top rail, which—again fortunately for many of us—some ambitious spirit generally contrives to do, either at or without the expense of a cropper.

So it happens that he avoids those moving accidents by flood and field which are irritating to the man who is not used to them ; and that he often comes up smiling with a comparatively fresh horse, while less wary sportsmen, who have been conscientiously riding the line, are beginning to wonder whether they have not had nearly enough of it, and to feel certain that their horses have quite.

When fourteen stone odd falls, it falls heavy ; and, as many even lighter weights know, the sensation of rising from the ground wondering what has been happening to you, how you came to be sitting about in a damp field, and why you have not a more satisfactory grasp of reins which are lumped up in your hand, or dangling about the fore-legs of a beast which is gaily careering away in the next field, is calculated to destroy the equanimity of the best tempered of men.

I like Tom Maizeley so much that I should prefer to depict him going as Dick Christian did in his best day, and taking what came in his way without fear or favour ; but a regard for fact has taken the point out of many a spirited story, albeit there are a good many

current anecdotes which have not been detrimentally influenced by such a consideration.

And it must not be supposed that the only men who sell horses are those who ride straight. A steady-going nag is of more value to many than a steeplechaser of the highest character, and when Tom has ridden a horse for the season he has not to look far for a purchaser who will give what is comparatively a long price. In respect to riding, it must be admitted that Tom, junior, does more than his father ever did, and were it not for the faith the elder man has in his son's common sense, he would be a little uneasy now and then at Tom's intimacy with young Brookley, the steeplechase jockey, and son of the trainer whose stables are near the kennels of the Meadowmere hounds.

Young Tom likes nothing better than a mount on one of Brookley's horses as it takes its morning gallop on the Downs, or perhaps goes for a turn over the jumps laid out on Coverton Common; and last year he turned his experience to good account by winning the Farmers' Plate at the Meadowmere Meeting, and selling the horse at a very decent figure. But Tom, junior, is not likely to ruin himself on the turf (nor, for the matter of that, is Brookley the sort of man to lead him astray), and already has shown his ability to lend a useful hand and a shrewd head to the management of affairs at the farm.

If you want to please Tom Maizeley, some day when,

jogging home from a good run, you pass his door, accept his hearty offer of a rest and a glass of his sound ale. Up the lane there, past the straw yard, where probably a foal and a couple of colts are plodding about in the deep litter, and put up your horse in the stable, where in the loose box lives the good old brood mare that would have won the Grand National but for a series of misfortunes which Tom will detail to you, and which are perfectly convincing beyond all question, to him at any rate.

Your beast may safely be committed to the charge of the old labourer who does duty as a groom, a type of sturdy agriculturist that is not to be beguiled by the winsome tongue of any agitator.

One of Tom's men was tempted to join a branch of Mr. Arch's institution some years ago, but grew tired of paying shillings for the benefit of gentry unknown, and at last the fact leaked out to the no small satisfaction of his companions, whose faculty for producing jokes is small, and who are thus provided with a jest for life. When any pecuniary matter is under discussion, it is the fashion to refer to this honest yokel as a millionaire who had so many shillings that he did not know what to do with them; and to make similar little jokes which go a wonderfully long way, and cause a wholly disproportionate amount of laughter as the men sit on the ale-house bench, or stow away their provisions in Tom's servants' kitchen.

It is into the other kitchen that Tom will conduct

you, and make you comfortable in a chair by the side of the capacious fireplace, where the flames of a roaring fire gleam on various incidents of Scripture history delineated in blue and white tiles. Tom has no drawing-room or dining-room, and sits here when he is not in his business room, somewhat laboriously conducting his correspondence, or making up his accounts. The girls have their sitting-room upstairs, inside the lattice-window with diamond panes, about which creepers cluster so richly in the summer ; but they will come down to do honour to their father's guest.

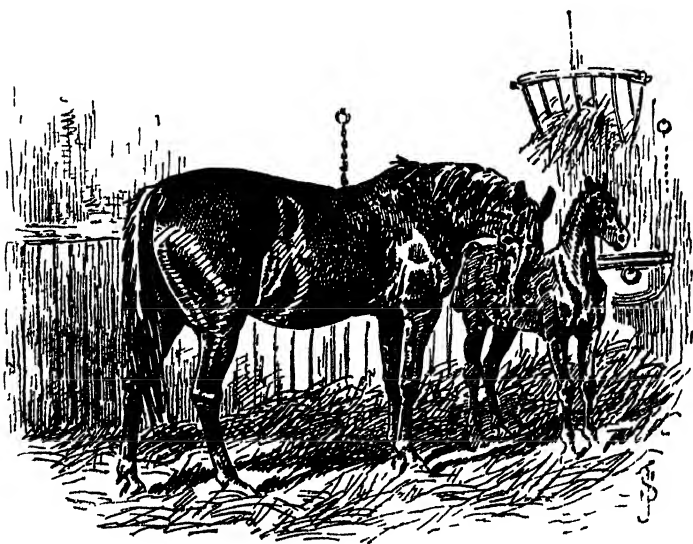
Declining port and sherry, for Tom's taste runs rather in the direction of heady beverages, and explaining the impossibility of consuming roast beef, a quantity of turkey, and a small mountain of brawn, when you are going to dine in a couple of hours, you will do well to accept, even in preference to the ale, a cup of tea with the rich cream, the originators of which are lowing as they pass through the farmyard. Such bread and butter, too, as Bessie Maizeley cuts for you is not to be had every day of the year.

Then, while a substantial meal is in course of preparation for Tom and his son, who has followed in after seeing to the horses, you have just time for a cigarette while Tom has a whiff at his churchwarden, the only way in which he can take his tobacco with a relish, and he will explain to you once more how it came that the old mare—a present, by the way, from Sir Henry Akerton, his tyrannical landlord—just failed to win the

Grand National, and indeed to obtain a place in that remarkable contest.

So with a cordial invitation from Tom to look in any time you're his way, a compliment to Mrs. Maizeley on her tea, and to the girls on their butter, a nod to young Brookley, who has called in passing, as you suspect for the sake of a word with Bessie, you take your leave.

Tom's hand is not a model for a sculptor, and, naturally, it is often in sad need of soap and water; but it is a pleasant hand to shake for all that, and its hearty grasp somehow or other seems to do you good as you trot away into the high-road towards home.



V.

A STRAIGHT RIDER.

THE Dowager Lady Hortington, sitting in her barouche at the Cross Roads on the occasion of a meet at that likely centre, and holding her gold-framed eye-glasses to her aquiline nose, surveys us with the sort of expression she might be expected to assume on suddenly coming upon a herd of harmless but eccentric animals; and presently her ladyship desires to be informed who is the boy on the large brown horse.

Sir Henry Akerton, who is on his horse at the side of the Hortington barouche, talking to its occupant, looks in the direction indicated.

Seated on a great raking thoroughbred bay—it is not a brown, but the dowager scorns details—is a youth with mild blue eyes set in a smooth, rosy, and guileless countenance, decorated only by a faint and downy moustache, and now wearing such a weary and melancholy aspect that we who know him well understand that he is peculiarly happy and alert this morning.

Kitty Trewson, dashing up in her most approved style, passes immediately behind the bay's tail—a proceeding which he accepts as an insult, and a furious

plunge is the consequence. But you need not be anxious for the youth's safety; he seems to be sitting carelessly enough, but his seat is a good deal tighter than it looks, and a tug at the bridle, accompanied by a touch of the spur, convinces the big bay that he will do well to behave himself.

"I know his face," Lady Hortington continues, as she gazes at this performance.

"Very likely; you've met him in town, no doubt. It's young Wynnerly, of the — Guards," Sir Henry answers, making his adieux, and giving a signal to his huntsman, which is speedily communicated to the pack, and responded to by an eager dash into the covert.

The youth is indeed that gallant warrior, Captain Wynnerly, whose fame as a gentleman-rider is European, and who, though one of the best fellows in the world, is by no manner of means the artless creature you would take him for if you were inclined to disregard the proverb which points out the folly of judging from appearances.

And that this folly is sometimes very expensive young Downing found to his cost on the occasion of Wynnerly's *début* as a steeplechase rider in our country.

Sir Henry Akerton had picked up in Ireland, for a small sum, an enormous chestnut horse which no one could manage to do anything with—except fall off, an operation that was performed with remarkable punctu-

ality and dispatch by those who found themselves in the altitude of his saddle. Wonderful stories had been told of what Fireworks, as he was called, could do when he liked; but the prospect of verifying these anecdotes seemed small, as his proceedings were generally limited to bucking, with an ability which the most experienced Australian waler might envy, and to stopping dead at his fences just at the moment when his rider had concluded that he certainly meant going this time.

The second whip, who usually rode Sir Henry's horses, had been put down so regularly that his confidence—to say nothing of his mortal frame—was severely shaken, and odds of three to one that whoever appeared on his back would not remain in that precarious situation till the end of the day were always to be obtained by the rashly speculative.

We heard, however, just before the Meadowmere Race Meeting, a couple of years ago, that a jockey was coming down who had won on Fireworks before, against very good horses; and not knowing Wynnerly in those days we were astonished at his arrival, on the morning of the races, to go round and inspect the course, with a couple of other strangers; he looked so young and tender and artless that none of us could believe he was able to ride Fireworks.

Downing, whose chief characteristic is the perfect satisfaction with which he regards himself, his opinions, his horses, and in fact all that is his—men who do not like him call him a supercilious ass—was a steward of

the meeting, and took the new-comers to show them the way; seeming greatly amused at Wynnerly's apparent dismay when they came to the brook.

"Over this river?" Wynnerly inquired with seeming anxiety and apprehension.

"Oh, yes! over here, sir. We call it the brook, though," Downing replied, with a rather contemptuous smile.

"Horrid great place! Isn't there a bridge or a way round?" he inquired, with an aspect of perfect sincerity, so far as could be seen, devoid of the faintest symptom of chaff. At all times it was undoubtedly a big jump, and rain had lately filled it and overflowed the banks.

"No, sir. Must go over between the flags—or in," the guide explained.

"Yes. I shall have to take it in two, I expect. Is it very deep?" Wynnerly asked.

"We'll see that you are not drowned, sir," Downing responded as they crossed the plank footbridge, to go and look at the posts and rails which, as Downing pleasantly anticipated, inspired fresh terrors in the infantile jockey's bosom; or so, at least, Downing imagined.

Downing had entered a horse for the steeplechase, and though I am certain Wynnerly never dreamed of influencing the betting by his demeanour while inspecting the course, the steward had satisfied himself that, with such a rider, Fireworks must be out of the hunt; and he not only laid the odds against that ill-disposed animal, but backed his own beast freely.

"You'll see some fun when that young gentleman gets on old Fireworks," Downing confided to his friends. "He's in the bluest funk you ever saw out of a paint-box; and look at the old horse kicking up behind and before!"

The old horse was indeed indulging himself in these and other vagaries, and generally making more of a beast of himself than nature had made already; but now that it had come to the point, Wynnerly stood by superintending the process of saddling with equanimity.

"Cruel bad temper he's in to-day! Why, it's twenty to one he doesn't get over the first two fences!" Downing exclaims in high good humour, which is but faintly checked when Sir Henry quietly rejoins,—

"I shouldn't make the odds about that too long, if I were you, Downing; and if he can win, you may depend upon it his rider will make him do it to-day."

It is soon evident that Wynnerly can sit on, at any rate. The moment he touches the saddle, Fireworks forms himself into a species of Gothic arch, his saddle being the apex, and then sets off to kick viciously, wriggling his body at the same time in an apparent attempt to see how his hind-legs look during the operation.

This is the strategical movement which usually disposes of his riders; but it has not this effect on Wynnerly, who, seeing that the question who is master had better be promptly decided, uses his cutting whip with



"IT IS SOON EVIDENT THAT WYNNERLY CAN SIT ON."

such effective vigour that the horse absolutely stands still for a moment, tries another buck, which is followed by three sounding rib-binders, then gallops down the course sideways, and jumps the hurdle with about eighteen inches to spare.

The folly of attempting to refuse the "river" was distinctly impressed upon him when an early symptom of insubordination displayed itself; and instead of being drowned, Wynnerly, to the open-mouthed amazement of Downing and his intimates, cantered in an easy winner, by many lengths, from the two competitors who had survived the course out of a field of seven. Downing paid up with a rather rueful face, but the lesson he learnt was worth a good deal of the money his experience cost him.

Until I saw Wynnerly go I had never thought that there was much in the recipe to make a good timber-jumper—"take him out and give him two or three heavy falls"—because I had imagined that one partner to the operation would never have cared about trying it. But Wynnerly tumbles about with a perfect good temper quite charming to behold—when you are the right side of an awkward obstacle. He is a living contradiction to the cogency of the complaint urged to me the other day, that when a man has learnt how to fall, he has generally learnt how to avoid falling; and so nearly half his studies are useless.

A short time ago, a stranger turned up at the meet, and soon after we got away, comfortably cleared a

nasty square-railed white gate, a great deal more *creditable*, as it seemed to many of us, to the carpenter who made it than to the farmer who put it up in a hunting country and left it fastened.

The business was accomplished in such an easy, unobtrusive manner, that the exceptional ability of the performer was past all question, and we wondered whether anything would stop him. The swollen banks of the Swirl towards which we presently approached seemed to answer our query in the affirmative; but we were wrong.

This river is, as we have all supposed, impracticable at the best of times; but the stranger thought it worth trying, and went at it with a will. For once the old proverb was falsified; or at least, though there was a "way," it was simply in, and not over. Man and horse disappeared, and as their heads rose to the surface up came Wynnerly, who had not been near when the gate was negotiated, but had since noted the way in which the new-comer had been going.

"We oughtn't to let the stranger have it all to himself!" Wynnerly said, and putting on as much steam as was obtainable, galloped to the bank, and, as was inevitable, landed about two-thirds of the journey across, disappeared in turn, but hitting on an easier way up the opposite bank, was ashore in time to give the stranger a hand to help him out.

A very stupid proceeding, the wise will say, with more than an appearance of truth; but there is some-

thing in the reckless spirit of the deed which, whatever it may show about Wynnerly's head, at least proves *that his heart is in the right place.**

In spite of his success in the saddle, Wynnerly has not more money than he knows what to do with, and if he had a good deal more, he would doubtless find means of application for it without mental exhaustion. The source of his gratification to-day is that he has picked up what Lady Hortington calls the large brown horse for such an amount as is indefinitely spoken of as "an old song" because the brute—probably a connection by birth of Fireworks aforesaid—has proved incorrigible in very skilful hands.

Encouragement—in which kindness has a part, as well as hands and heels—seems effective to-day, however, and very likely his late owners forgot the former half of this compound, and lost sight of the fact that a cheery, coaxing word or two sometimes has more influence than a cutting whip or polished spur.

A horse not unfrequently has a reputation for bad temper, and it very often fails to strike its owner that the temper may have been made bad, and can be cured, without being violently broken; an attempt to do which latter very often fails, by the way. Wynnerly can be firm enough, and can hit hard enough, when occasion demands that form of argument; but he also knows the

* It may be that some readers, who do not live in that part of the country where Wiltshire and Gloucestershire unite, will protest against this anecdote as overdone. In its main incident it is strictly true.

effect of a gentle word and a friendly pat on the neck. From the manner in which the two are getting on together to-day, there can be little doubt that they have arrived at that mutual understanding which, as before said in the course of these sketches, is indispensable to safe and pleasant journeys across country.

Let us see how the hunt generally get over this fence—a tolerably big flight of rails, with a ditch on the landing side.

Here they are! Up comes Sir Henry in that sort of rocking-horse canter which his animals generally affect, and he gets over quietly. Tom Maizeley does not like the look of it, and unaffectedly pulls up. Here is Scatterly, on a pulling chestnut mare, which rushes at the rails and smashes the top one to splinters, making a way for a little batch of followers, among whom is Kitty Trewson, who means to have it if possible; but Sultan is rather blown, and, dropping his hind-legs in the ditch, looks like rolling over and giving Miss Kitty a nasty fall, luckily recovering just in time to avert the catastrophe. Scratton, the dealer, on another young one, gets over neatly, and his groom does the same with little exertion. Checkley gallantly looks at the broken rail, and boldly rides away.

Here comes Wynnerly: rather too fast, and heading for a place where the rail is high and heavy. The pace is hardly of his choosing, and they come whizzing down at a speed which must take them over or through. Over it is, and rather too much so, for the big horse, over-

jumping himself, goes a couple of strides and blunders on his head; but Wynnerly, sitting well back, pulls him together again, cleverly saves the cropper, and goes on as gaily as if nothing had happened.

I think he will make something of that horse yet: if he doesn't the chances assuredly are that no one will.



VI.

AN UNLUCKY SPORTSMAN.

FORTUNE is said to be capricious. In her treatment of poor Chansett, however, she is certainly consistent enough—too consistent a good deal for him—for it is his peculiarity that something always seems to happen to spoil his fun whenever he attempts to pursue his favourite sport.

It is not that he always comes to grief when out with the hounds. He rides fairly well; and, considering that for some years past fate has put him on hired or borrowed horses, he has not very much to complain of in this respect. If there be a rabbit hole in a field, a loosely filled-in drain, or any other sort of trap, it is not improbable that he will be caught in it; and when he takes his own line at a fence there is not unlikely to be deep and treacherous ground on the other side. More than once he has been turned over by a tough binder in a rotten-looking hurdle; and, in fact, he has rather more than his share of bad luck, having regard to his undeniably respectable judgment.

But, somehow or other, things usually go badly with him. When anticipation looks rosiest there is an

impending shadow, and that slip between the cup and the lip of which we have all heard is a familiar accident with poor Chansett. Among his friends at the Mutton Chop Club the question "Is there going to be a frost?" is generally answered by another query, "Is Chansett going to hunt?" If so, hard weather is accepted as inevitable. Should a man's horse go lame, the inference is that Chansett had been invited to ride it, or that he was on the point of setting out on its back when the injury was discovered.

One evening last season Chansett turned up at the Club in a state of considerable cheeriness, ballasted somewhat by the suspicion that the demon of ill-luck which so steadily followed him might be lurking for him as usual in an unexpected place. Chansett was going to hunt with the North Wessex. A friend of his, a member of the Hunt, who had a couple of horses down in that neighbourhood, was away for a time, and had generously told Chansett that he might go down any time he chose, and a horse would be sent to the station to meet him if he gave notice the day before. Chansett knew both horses, and selected the one he liked best; and when the train pulled up—he looked out of the window rather nervously, though he had sent both letter and telegram to make sure—there was the animal being led to and fro.

For once all seemed well. Chansett divested himself of his great-coat and swung himself into the saddle, adjusted his stirrups, pressed on his hat, and felt that

there was no mistake about it this time, at any rate. At the bottom of the descent from the station was a sign-post with "Whorley Bridge" on it, and this was the spot fixed for the meet.

"I've got time, I suppose?" Chansett asked the man.

"Yes, sir; hounds meet at eleven and it's just about four miles. You can't miss it, sir. There's sign-posts all the way and the road's as nigh straight as may be."

It was about half-past ten when Chansett, with a last glance at the arm of the sign-post, to make sure that the affair was not dodging him and that it was all right, put his horse to a trot and jogged off in the highest spirits. He reached some cross roads, but the faithful post was there and "Whorley Bridge" stood out in newly painted letters. Now a sign-post is the best of all possible guides, when you know where to look for it; but, though Chansett felt sure he had scrupulously obeyed the directions of his dumb friends, he suddenly found the road grow into a green lane, and following on discovered that he was a solitary figure on some wide-spreading Downs. This was a little confusing; still he had noticed the position of the sun, and by this guide could continue something like the line of the road by which he had come.

He was just beginning to feel an uncomfortable sensation in the nature of a doubt when about half a mile away he caught sight of a man on horseback, bearing

away towards the right and going at a reaching gallop—just about as fast as a wise man dares to go at the beginning of what may be the run of the season, keeping something in hand and yet not pulling so as to make his horse tire itself by fighting for the bit. The tag end of the hunt, evidently, and hounds are off on a hot scent, Chansett thought, as he took his horse by the head and set off after his fleeting friend. He was a good deal behind, for, so far as Chansett could see, there was no one else between them and the spot where the Downs merged into woodland. He had not misjudged the good horse under him, which slipped over the ground at racing pace, rather faster than Chansett would have cared to go, but that he found he did not diminish the gap between himself and the man ahead. If, in fact, hounds were running straight away from them, the chances of catching them seemed problematical, though of course one never knows how or when hounds may turn. At the top of the Downs where the wood began, there might be something more to see; and Chansett pictured to himself the hunt below him, hounds coming rather towards him than otherwise, so that he could breathe his horse, trot down gently and join in, well ahead with an animal under him fresher than any in the field—though the pace for the last mile had been fast. The horse he was on could jump, and he guessed the sort of fences there would be in the vale. Fortune owed him a turn; clearly his luck had changed, and on he galloped merrily.

But what was his friend ahead doing? As he neared the wood, the broad ride through which Chansett could now see, his leader stopped to a trot, pulled up, turned right round facing his pursuer, and having so stood for a few seconds, began to walk back, the rider checking attempts at a trot.

Chansett approached him, and detected a lad, in cords and butcher boots, a pot hat and tweed coat.

"Don't you see anything of the hounds?" Chansett asked.

"Hounds? No, sir. They ain't come this way. They was at Whorley Bridge this morning. I passed 'em on the road as I come along," the guide answered.

"I thought you were riding after them!" poor Chansett said.

"No, sir. I come up here to give the mare a gallop," was the response.

"And where's Whorley Bridge?" Chansett inquired, looking at his watch. It was only a few minutes past eleven now.

"Whorley Bridge, sir? You've been coming right away from it," the stable boy replied. "It's nigh upon four mile from here," and he explained the route; but by the time that Chansett reached the spot there was no sign of horse or hound. There was nothing for it but to go home and reflect on the folly of jumping at conclusions. Because a man happened to be galloping it did not follow that he was after hounds, as Chansett now saw distinctly.

Chansett's latest exploits with the Meadshire are decidedly curious.

"I wish I could lend you a horse, old man, but I can't, because I've only got two that can go at all now, and one was out yesterday for a hard day," Flutterton said one Tuesday afternoon at the Mutton Chops; "but I'll tell you what you can do. Write to Gates, and tell him to send on something decent for you on Thursday, and come and dine and sleep at my place. We meet at the Cross Roads, and I'll drive you over. We'll make up for it!"

The thing that had to be made up for was a cub-hunting expedition of Chansett's. He had been looking for the hounds in a strange country, and after following various intricate directions had found himself on the banks of a stream in which a number of nondescript animals were searching for an otter whose existence had been reported—falsely to all appearances.

At any rate with Flutterton he was certain to find the hounds, and we knew that the good-natured little man would do his best to insure Chansett a day's sport.

"Don't trust to a letter. Telegraph to Gates, and ask him if he can send a horse for you to the Cross Roads, on Thursday. Pay the answer, and say you're going to hunt with me. Cross Roads mind, with the Meadshire hounds, on Thursday. There can't be a mistake about that, though you are such an unlucky beggar when you get on a horse."

Thus Flutterton gave directions. Chansett wrote the

telegram out, and in the course of a couple of hours back came the answer. "Good horse shall be sent as ordered. Cross Roads, Thursday."

"Well! Unless the brute he sends falls down and breaks something on the way, I should think you are all right this time!" Flutterton said, as he went off to catch the train, after giving the most elaborate directions how Chansett was to travel next day.

The luckless man arrived at Flutterton's station in due course, was driven to the house, dined—comfortably, I have no doubt, from pleasant experiences—and appeared next morning at breakfast in boots and breeches, resolved to do justice to his good luck. The dog-cart came round in plenty of time, and Flutterton's mother and sisters waved a cheery adieu from the dining-room window as the horse trotted down the avenue, out of the lodge gates, and along the way to the Cross Roads. Through the market-town they clattered, passing on the way many mounted men with coats of all colours, a plentiful supply of pinks among the number.

"There's one of Gates' horses," Flutterton said, pointing with his whip as a horse and rider emerged from the arch leading from the principal inn. "Not a bad-looking one."

"That's probably the one he's sent for me, I should think, and that fellow's got him by mistake. That would be just my luck," Chansett exclaimed.

"No, but it isn't. The man who's on it has it regularly. You're all right for once!"

“Then there’ll be no scent or no foxes,” Chansett replied, not half meaning it though, this time.

“There’ll be both, you bet!” Flutterton answered, and they drove on, horsemen being now numerous, and horsewomen adding pleasant variety to the scene. Flutterton was nodding welcomes, and taking off his hat busily, as they neared the meet; and presently he descried his horse in the distance, being led up and down a byway.

“There’s Miss Earle, with Wynnerly singeing his wings, and there’s old Crookton swearing at something or other. I see my horse, but where’s yours, I wonder? I told my servant to look out for Gates’ man.”

A hasty glance and a careful survey were equally in vain. Gates’ man was not visible. Chansett looked at his watch. It was eleven within three minutes. The faces of the friends grew long, nor were they shortened when Flutterton’s groom reported that he had seen nothing of Gates’s man. But stay! There is Gates himself, in a cart.

“Where’s my friend’s horse, Gates?” Flutterton asked.

“That’s just exactly what I can’t make out, sir. I sent him, saw him start myself, sir, before I harnessed the cob. Strangest thing I ever knew, for I told the man to walk him quietly, and he was a good steady horse,” Gates returned.

By this time a move was being made, and the animal was still invisible. Of course Flutterton pressed

Chansett to take his horse, and of course Chansett emphatically declined, alleging with some truth that he was too heavy for the light-weight hunter that carried little Flutterton. Equally, of course, Chansett refused to listen to his friend's determination not to hunt, to go back and have a look for some birds, &c. At length Flutterton was reluctantly persuaded to set off after the now rapidly retreating hunt, and in a few moments Chansett somewhat sadly took the reins and started in the dog-cart for the town—his things had been sent to the railway station, for he was due in London at night.

There was no train for a couple of hours or so, and while lunch was preparing Chansett strolled round the inn stables. Some rough-coated farmers' horses, an old poster or two, and a very good-looking hunter occupied the stalls. The latter struck Chansett by his promising appearance. If he had only had a creature like that what fun it would have been!

"Whose is that?" Chansett asked of a man standing near, who had been curiously examining the gentleman's legs.

"One of Mr. Gates' 'osses, sir," the man replied, touching his hat.

"What's he doing here?" he continued.

"Gentleman wrote for it from London, sir, and never come. Missed the train, I 'spect, he did."

"I wrote to Mr. Gates, or rather I telegraphed for a horse to-day, and it never came. I am Mr. Chansett."

The man gazed blankly.

"That's the name, sir, that I was to bring the horse to, and here I was, wasn't I, Jim?" and he appealed to an ostler who had strolled up to hear the colloquy.

"You was, 'Arry," Jim answered.

"Master says to me, you walk her down gently to the Cross Keys for the gentleman, he says."

"To the Cross *Roads*," Chansett interrupted. "I drove to the meet and expected to find the horse there."

"Cross *Keys*, master says. That's the way we always does. Hunting gentlemen come down by the 8.15 express and their 'osses is waiting for 'em 'ere when they come. That's always the rule."

Chansett looked up and saw the sign-board, two huge keys crossed over each other, swinging above his head.

Whether the master had made a slip, or whether the man, accustomed to a certain routine, had let the order fall upon unheeding ears and done as he was used to doing, did not appear. It was twelve o'clock, there was the horse, there was poor Chansett; where the hounds might be was more than doubtful.

"My usual luck!" he muttered, and, I fear, added something rude about the innocent Cross Keys, creaking slowly above.

When, therefore, Chansett tells us that he is going to hunt, light-hearted young men ask him what are the odds about it, advise him not to say where he is going till he

gets there, and bait him with much simple chaff. But when the day does come, and, getting a good start, he cuts down the field and covers himself with glory, every one will heartily pat him on the back and none will envy his good fortune.



VII.

A SOCIAL PROBLEM.

"THAT'S a rare good-looking one. Whose is it?" Scatterly inquires one day, as he rides up to join a little group of us at a meet at the Kennels, and gazes at a model of a light-weight bay hunter, which is being led to and fro by a groom of peculiarly sporting aspect, mounted himself on a very likely-looking chestnut mare.

"Don't know the man or the horse either. They don't live in these parts," Downing answers; but Wynnerly is better informed, and, coming up in time to hear the last remark, enlightens us.

"That's Arthur Crossley's man; and I suppose he's coming to hunt with us to-day," he observes. And his opinion is speedily verified, for the moment afterwards Crossley appears at the other end of the road, cantering on the grass by the wayside, his neat hack well splashed with mud, as is natural after a twelve-mile journey along miry roads, with an occasional cut across country.

"Why the deuce does he come here when the Fallow-field meet at the Hall, I wonder?" Scatterly mutters,

as Crossley approaches and exchanges his hack for the bay.

But this is one of the many things connected with Crossley concerning which we are ignorant. Crossley is down hunting with the famous pack upon whose country our humbler hunt borders. They are at one of their best meets to-day, while we rarely do much from the Kennels, at any rate until after a good deal of useless knocking about; yet Crossley takes the trouble to send on his horses and make a long journey himself for the sake of coming to us.

Crossley is, in fact, a mystery, and, it may be, a very unfortunate man.

I know nothing against him, nor, so far as I can gather, does anyone else—nothing, that is to say, definite; but his name has an ill savour about it, and if he is perfectly straight, he is very unlucky in the place he holds in general estimation.

Crossley was at Eton, and left prematurely. He went into a Lancer regiment, from which after a couple of years he sold out, having by this time entirely dissipated his patrimony, and successfully run up debts to an amount which the sale of his commission would have done little to discharge had he applied the money towards such a purpose.

The fact that of the two chargers with which he then obliged little Flutterton, at a high figure, one proved to be glandered, and the other went very lame, is another of Crossley's misfortunes, perhaps. Symptoms of

glanders are often not discovered for a considerable while after the disease has affected a horse, and an animal may go lame at any time: so possibly Crossley was innocent of any knowledge of his horse's condition, and certainly he so persuaded Flutterton, as their subsequent partnership in the steeplechaser Bullfinch—over which poor Flutterton came so sad a pecuniary cropper—sufficiently proves.

Crossley was dreadfully cut up about these two chargers, and vowed that he would gladly return the price, if he had it; and as he had not, it is impossible to say that his anxiety was feigned, or that he would not have kept his word if he could.

We of the Meadowmere knew very little of him, except as a gentleman rider, and that knowledge was chiefly gained in London. Crossley is a member of a good club, and of the Drake, which some will maintain to be a good club likewise, while others will hold a contrary opinion. He was put up some time ago for the Mutton Chops, the popularity of which pleasant resort is well known; but the story as to there having been ten members of the committee at the election when his name came up for ballot, and eleven black balls in the ballot-box, is manifestly an exaggeration.

As no one has the least idea where he gets a shilling from, the supposition that his manner of livelihood is queer, if not crooked, must obviously be gratuitous; and Saddler, who was in the regiment with him, has little to say when we ask for information, as, the first covert

near the kennels having as usual been drawn blank, we make a move to the spinney beyond.

"What sort of a fellow is Crossley?" some one inquires, ranging up to Saddler's side, and nodding towards the new-comer riding along talking to Downing, who seems to have some sort of acquaintance with the master, though he did not know the man.

"Rather a good-looking fellow, I think, about twenty-nine years old now, I suppose. Has a dark moustache, and turns it up at the ends," Saddler answers, all these facts being patent to us.

"Yes, but what does he do?" Scatterly asks.

"Rides under 10 st. 7 lb.—and over anything," is the oracular response.

"I can see that, but is he a good fellow, I mean?" Scatterly continues.

"Well, I should be surprised to hear him singing Dr. Watts's hymns, or, at least, if he did I should fancy that he had a very good reason for it," is all we can get out of Saddler; and Crawley Paine, the sporting novelist, on being appealed to for information—for Crawley knows everybody, and a good deal about him—makes some remark in vaguely sporting phraseology about Crossley "going rather short sometimes," and suggests that we had better ask little Flutterton.

With the incident to which Crawley Paine alludes we are most of us acquainted, however.

After that little matter of the chargers had been cleared up, and when the temporary interruption to the

friendship between Crossley and Flutterton had been repaired, Flutterton, by his mentor's advice, purchased Bullfinch, and on him Crossley won a hurdle race at a suburban meeting with an ease which seemed to show that the horse's ability was altogether out of the common. They tried him, therefore, over the Meadowmere steeplechase course, which much resembles that at Kenilworth, against old Argus, an experienced animal who went on all occasions with the regularity of a chronometer, and could always be implicitly depended on as a trial horse. I well remember Flutterton's delight at his anticipated triumph as he recounted to us at the Drake one evening the results of the test.

"I never thought that we could beat such a good old horse as Argus, you know, but if we could get near him it was good enough. Well, they came on to the water, where I was standing; Crossley on Bullfinch. You fellows don't like Crossley, I know, and I think fellows are very unjust to him, for he's a dear, good chap; however, you'll admit that he can ride, I suppose? Well, on they came, old Argus plodding on at a deuce of a pace though—you know how he goes—and jerking himself over his jumps in that queer way he has. They got over the water together, Bullfinch pulling like blazes, and jumping like fun. Then I ran across to see them come in, and there was young Maizeley warming up old Argus; but it was no use, and we can beat his head off. There's nothing nearly so good as Argus at

Kenilworth, and you fellows can put your shirts on without being a bit afraid."

"I'm glad of that, because I do it so often," Wagstaff interposed, sniggering at his little joke.

Of course we took the tip, and a little commission went up from the Drake. We had made a good many mistakes that year—which, as a matter of fact, we do most years, many of us—and, congratulating ourselves that this time it was all right, at any rate, went down to see our money pulled off.

But, alas! that little commission went after the majority of its predecessors.

Something was wrong somewhere.

Bullfinch looked very like winning as they came in sight, but failed to preserve that agreeable aspect by the time they reached the post, and was cleverly beaten by a weedy mare called Virginia Creeper, to whom, according to general computation, Argus could have given about two stone with perfect safety. Poor little Flutterton's airy castle toppled over—and it had been such a beautiful castle, too, with a stable attached to it containing the two-year-old which was certain to win next year's Derby. Crossley vowed he was dead broke with such lamentable emphasis that Flutterton, hard hit as he was, offered to lend him a couple of hundred to go on with; but Crossley still further won his innocent young friend's heart by declining the proffered aid, with imprecations on his bad luck or want of judgment which had let poor Flutterton in so deeply.

The little man looked very white for some days, and having got leave, went to Nice with his family. From those southern shores come accounts of his mild occupations, and his sporting propensities are satisfied by the loss of a few five-franc pieces occasionally at Monte Carlo, a diversion which he pronounces dull, for, as he remarks, one soon gets tired of putting coins down on a table for the mere fun of seeing them scooped in by a fellow with a rake.

But Crossley's recuperative powers were wonderful, and the result of what he stigmatised as a howling cropper, is that he has been able to take four hunters and a galloping hack to Meadshire, and to set up in a neat little establishment with Major Rawley, who doesn't hunt, but likes to be in a hunting country, and having suddenly conceived a deep affection for Crossley, takes care to have an excellent dinner for him when he comes home from hunting. Generally a friend accompanies him, sometimes two; or the major has a guest; and after dinner what more natural than that they should while away the winter evenings with a little poker, *écarté*, or a few rounds of Nap?

Hard as Crossley was hit, I have no doubt that he will pay up if you win from him; but the chances of your winning are not considerable.

Not that I would insinuate that the two hosts do not play fair.

Such assertions should never be made without proof, and this is a cruelly censorious world, ready to carp at

and criticise everything. For instance, it is well known—everybody knows—that horses will not always run up to their best form, and the fact that since Bullfinch lost at Kenilworth, and passed into the hands of Leggitt, the bookmaker, he has beaten his Kenilworth form by a good deal—possibly by as much as two stone, as Flutterton's friends angrily assert—is no reason why those gallant Lancers should talk about the dearest case of roping that ever was seen, should go so far as to vow that Crossley tried to pull the horse into his fences, and should complain of the remissness of the stewards in not investigating the matter.

I disbelieve these stories; simply because, had Crossley wanted to lose, I fancy he is quite good enough jockey to stop his horse without making it apparent.

The very likely looking bay aforesaid, on which Crossley is this morning seated, seems fully to justify his appearance by his style of going; and it is to be observed that when Crossley is on a good one he takes care to make the circumstance generally evident.

Here he has just one of those opportunities in which he delights.

Soon after getting away, we checked in a big grass field, bounded straight ahead by a high, tough-looking rail and a broad ditch, a sufficiently formidable sort of jump to make the boldest cordially hope that we shall not have to tempt our fate in that direction. The ditch is not only broad, but deep, with a nasty sloping clay

side—just one of those places where if you don't get over you get in, and probably have to stay there, with your horse in an attitude not only disagreeable in itself, but derogatory to the feelings of an animal that has not been brought up in a circus. "The man who jumped that awful big cutting" will be talked about until some other moving incident of flood or field comes in its turn to claim attention, and this is precisely what Crossley desires.

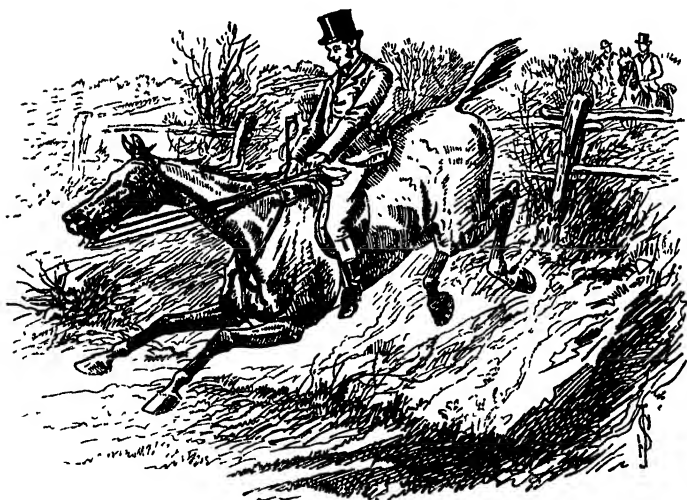
A couple of hounds turn that way, plunge in, and climb out again, one slipping back with a most unpleasantly suggestive splash.

This is enough for Crossley, who takes the little bay by the head, and, feeling sure that his achievement cannot be overlooked, makes for by no means the easiest place, goes at it with a rush, and lands well over with something to spare. As it happens, a hound hits off the scent to the right, and we have not to risk this ugly place—I do not know how other fellows feel about it: if they experience my sentiments they are sincerely relieved; glory is delightful, but broken bones take off its gloss. Crossley, however—who very soon afterwards gets on his second horse, though we have had no run as yet, and only threw off half an hour ago—has not jumped in vain.

The little bay goes home to Downing's stables, and I have no doubt that the cheque he writes is a heavy one. We shall see in due time whether Sir Henry Akerton's

suspensions as to the little bay being patched up and unable to stand work are correct.

Possibly Downing may have made an excellent bargain, but I don't suppose Crossley sold the horse much under its value.



VIII.

A "SWELL."

THE noble Baron Tourneymeade can only be described as a "swell," unmitigated and gorgeous.

The epithet is not accorded to him by reason of his title.

There are numerous peers who are not swells, and still more numerous swells who are not peers. The Duke of Kyleshire, for example, carries on his circulation by means of the very bluest blood; but he looks like a cad, and successfully takes pains to justify his appearance. Lord Sterteris, again, inherits an escutcheon which has been borne in the van of battle by some of those who have added honour to the noblest names in English history; but his lordship is the type of a greedy Lord Mayor at the termination of a hard dining year of office. Another nobleman, second to neither of these in descent and in the quarterings on his coat of arms, resembles a political nonconformist in the grocery line so closely that you would be inclined to bet ten to one he was accustomed to occupy the pulpit of his local Bethel for the purpose of calling Lord Beaconsfield a man of sin, and an immediate

descendant of that lady whose character is intimated by the vivid colour of her garments.

It is Tourneymeade's appearance, his bearing, his behaviour, his manner of speaking, and his tone of voice, which necessitate the application of the word "swell;" though I dislike slang, and should be glad to find an appropriate term in purer Saxon.

Your first impression with regard to Tourneymeade, if you did not know him, would be that he was not quite awake.

His hair is light, his eyes blue, his moustache scant and downy, although he is now, I suppose, some seven-and-twenty years of age. His nose is delicately aquiline, and his peculiarity of expression is that his eyes never seem entirely open: if a gun were suddenly fired off close to his ear it would probably have no more effect than to produce a mild inquiry as to what was the row. On the whole he is rather good-looking, and extremely agreeable; and this idea of him is not weakened by the knowledge that he has an unencumbered income of some £45,000 a year, with expectations.

The first Lord was a distinguished politician, and revived the extinct title of an ancestor on retiring from an active position in public life. His son also had a reputation for talent; and between them they appear to have got through the allowance of intellect which had been apportioned to last the family for some generations; for the present bearer of the title has little wit, and only shows occasional glimmerings of mental power

in the rapidity with which he calculates the odds, and realises the chances of his betting-book.

Tourneymeade has rooms in the hotel of the county town near to which are the headquarters of the Fallowfield, and in November he takes up his residence there with about a dozen hunters and a few hacks, a number which is generally swelled before the season closes; for the noble baron is always ready to buy a horse, and is, I fancy, a perfect annuity to some of his friends who generally have a wonderful animal to sell; while for various reasons, which may hereafter be hinted at, his own stud does not last at all well. You would think that hunting bored him very grievously if you were not aware that he was at least equally bored, during the season, in his yacht, on the moors, after the merry little brown birds which make September pleasant in the country, and after the long-tailed heroes and the less splendid heroines of October.

Tourneymeade is a patron of the drama, principally of that variety which has been supplied of late by Mr. John Hollingshead. He holds a decided opinion that literature is in a bad way, because "some fellow ought to write a book about that girl Farren," as he familiarly calls the lady, and no fellow does; while other fellows, who are equally negligent, ought to write other books about Miss Vaughan and other damsels who are wont to delight him. He has seen something about Mrs. Siddons in a theatrical newspaper, and is jealous for the reputations of those he admires, being strongly inclined

to hold, with regard to the great *tragedienne*, that, as he once confided to me in a moment of languid enthusiasm, Miss Farren "could give her fifty in a hundred and beat her head off."

The more serious forms of the lyric drama do not win Tourneymeade's admiration. He went to see an opera last season without observing the name of the production, and with but a very faint appreciation of the plot. "There was a lot of dancing and some fights, and a red beggar cutting about and doing tricks. Then a fellow came on and sang a deuce of a lengthy song to a house, and at last they all went to heaven—singing all the time, you know—no one allowed to speak a word." This opera we assumed was *Faust* (although Tourneymeade appears to have been slightly mistaken as to the ultimate destination to which the hero is conducted), and when we pressed him for details about the song he remembered, his criticism much amused me.

"I liked that sort of 'View Holloa' he gave," Tourneymeade replied, meaning the high C which occurs in the *aria*. "Oh, yes, I liked that fellow. Good second whip he'd make, wouldn't he? Pretty voice to call hounds out of covert." The notion struck us as quaint.

It is principally in the hunting field, however, that we have to deal with Tourneymeade, and when we take an occasional turn with the Fallowfield, as some of us do now and then when their meets are on our side of

the country, he is seldom absent, and invariably profuse in his offers of hospitality.

Tourneymeade is undoubtedly a good rider, at any rate so far as getting safely over a country goes; though of course his horses are all made hunters of high reputation, and he rarely has more to do than sit down in his saddle and trust to their discretion and knowledge of their business.

The story goes that one day, when out on a raw young Irish horse which had come from that island with a great character, founded upon undiscernible grounds, after several contentions, obstinately fought out on both sides, as to the desirability of jumping fences, Tourneymeade pulled up and dismounted, turned the animal adrift with a cut of the whip, declaring that it was less trouble to walk than ride a brute like that; and after sitting on a gate and smoking for a considerable time, hoping that his second horseman would bring him something to go home on, at least, if the hounds were lost for the day, that he strolled towards the nearest village where a fly was procurable, and went back on wheels.

There is, I think, some consolation to poor men in the reflection that two or three horses, bought with deliberation and studied with patience, afford much more genuine pleasure and amusement to their master, who is proud of them, than such a man as Tourneymeade can possibly derive from a large stud, the individual members of which he only knows by name—

when he remembers it. Tourneymeade certainly does not recognise his own animals when he sees them, a circumstance with which his stud groom is perfectly well acquainted.

While we were chatting one day when I was out with the Fallowfield a man rode up, a friend of Tourneymeade, to inquire who that was on his chestnut mare.

"Which mare?" Tourneymeade asked.

"Why the one I sold you last month. There she is; a fellow with a brown coat and leggings on her," he answered; "rum-looking little snob."

"Can't be mine," Tourneymeade said; "I wanted to ride her to-day, and asked Plaits if she could come out, but he said she was lame; though I don't know how the deuce she came so, for I haven't ridden her for three weeks."

"Well, that's the mare I sold you, you may take your oath," his friend continued.

"Looks like her, don't it? But of course it can't be."

"All right, old fellow! I dare say it can't be—only it is," the friend answered, riding off as he spoke.

"It can't be one of my fellows got up like that? Besides, the mare's wrong," Tourneymeade observed, as we two galloped off, for hounds were now running; and it did seem improbable that the odd-looking personage on the handsome chestnut should be mounted from the Tourneymeade stable.

His friend, however, whose curiosity was piqued, told off his groom to keep an eye on the chestnut mare, and

see where she went home to; and surely enough she was ridden to a small public in the outskirts of the town, where one of Mr. Plaits' boys was waiting for her, and taking her from her rider, leisurely trotted home.

Plaits was accustomed, it subsequently appeared, to let out his master's horses to his friends, in return for services rendered, and to casual acquaintances who were looked on as safe, at so much a day.

On a certain morning, too, Tourneymeade, happening to go round to his stables—a very rare occurrence with him—was somewhat surprised to see Mr. Plaits himself ride into the yard on a horse which his master had been hoping, by Mr. Plaits' kind permission, to ride himself that day. The animal had every appearance of having very recently, in ordinary phrase, been "done to a turn," and Plaits was extremely surprised and annoyed at seeing his master.

"Hullo, Plaits, what's up?" Tourneymeade inquired, as he looked at the horse's drooping head and foam-flecked sides. "What's this? Firefly, isn't it?"

"He wanted a sweat, my lord," the groom somewhat sulkily answered, "and I thought I'd better give it him myself."

"By Jove! he's had it, too, hasn't he? Pretty hot, I should fancy!" Tourneymeade observed.

Neither he nor the owners of some half-dozen other gallant steeds were acquainted with the fact that Plaits and a few of his friends had that morning been running off a catch-weight sweepstakes of £5 a head, and that

Firefly, after a hard struggle, had been beaten half a length. Thus it comes to pass that Tourneymeade has usually found it necessary to augment his stud as the season progressed, and that, in spite of the uncomplaining manner in which he pays the huge bills so ingeniously concocted by Mr. Plaits—about as big a rascal as may be found in the three kingdoms—horses do not thrive in his stable, and very rarely fetch half the money he gave for them.

But scant justice would be done to Tourneymeade's get-up by simply saying that it is invariably irreproachable.

The baronial legs, from a critical point of view, might be called attenuated if one judged by a masculine standard; but it is not sinew and muscle that the boot and breeches makers want, and these professors find scope for their highest efforts in Lord Tourneymeade. Hat, neck-cloth, the neat little bow which fits in just above his well-cleaned tops, are all the quintessence of "form;" and however Plaits may rob his master, there can be no question as to the manner in which he turns out his horses.

A boy from the Tourneymeade stables is as sure to understand his business as he is to understand the tricks of the trade and to rob his master; for Plaits has the communistic view of equality, that so long as he has the lion's share without interference, those who can may pick up the bones.

What Tourneymeade wants is a wife, and he was very

nearly being provided with that luxury last season; but if the young lady were anxious to marry him she spoilt her chance, as many of us do spoil our chances, by being too keen. It was for her sweet sake that he sat out the opera aforesaid, and, being invited to Leicestershire, a too ardent mother thought proper to carry on the campaign by sending her daughter, an admirable rider, out hunting with the Fallowfield.

The enchantress, anxious to display her skill and courage to the best advantage, jumped one or two fences a length before Tourneymeade—too immediately before him, in fact; for once, cutting in at the last moment, his horse swerved, came down, and afforded its noble owner an excellent view of four glittering shoes passing within a few inches of his head.

"A deuced nice girl when she's sitting on a chair," is Tourneymeade's present verdict upon the charmer; "but when she gets on a horse she baulks you at your fences, and jumps on you when you are down."

And, on the whole, his equanimity was so seriously disturbed by the young lady's exploits, that I fancy her chance is over.

If he is not clever—and truth compels the statement that he is not—Tourneymeade is generous, kind-hearted, and thoroughly a gentleman. No doubt some day he will marry a lady who is not an Amazon; and, if she be shrewd and sensible, Tourneymeade will make an excellent country gentleman, and be a credit and satisfaction to his county.

IX.

AN M.F.H.—ANOTHER VARIETY.

IN former pages the Marquis of Wiltshire has been indistinctly sketched; and happy is the country ruled over by such an M.F.H. But, as most people are aware, there are other varieties of masters; and in the Fallowfield country they have some knowledge of the less satisfactory sorts, the recollection of whom is very much more amusing than were the actual experiences.

It will be generally admitted that if all of us only spent what we could afford, money would not invariably be invested as it is at present.

Charley Hieflight's stable of fourteen hunters would be curtailed to very much more modest proportions, and Willy Recknott's hunting would be confined to an occasional mount on a friend's horse, and some three or four turns during the season on a two-guinea hack-hunter hired from the stable in the county town, whereas he never has less than a couple of very likely animals in whatever place he may be quartered; and perhaps he will pay all debts in connection with them some day, if he can. But while some men spend more than they can afford, others spend less, and one of the latter kind was

Scruton, who for one season ruled the destinies of the Meadowmere.

The hunt had gradually fallen into a bad way. Sir Henry Akerton, their former—and happily their present—Master, had given up the hounds and gone to the South of France. So much jealousy and wrangling followed attempts to find a successor that they tried a committee of management, which, while it circumscribed the limits of angry discussions, decidedly intensified their vehemence; the result being that we had very little hunting, and that little was of a very unsatisfactory sort.

But the departure of one principal cause of discord, and the death of another, smoothed matters to some extent, and with a tolerable approach to unanimity it was resolved to accept Scruton's offer to hunt three days a week, with a guaranteed subscription, which he undertook to supplement.

Now those who knew Scruton best had grave doubts about his doing anything for the good of the county, unless in the first and foremost place it specially redounded to the good of that peculiar portion of it in which Scruton himself was interested.

He was fond of hunting, and having a very comfortable little property, could well afford to gratify his taste for sport. But he was no less fond of his money; and if he did not take the hounds in the hope of getting his hunting for nothing, a serious injustice was done to his character, for to this conclusion we speedily came.

His stud consisted of a pair of carriage-horses, a couple of fairly good old hunters, together with a pony which was driven about all day long, with occasional periods of rest, which were not supposed to be interrupted by such episodes as a trip to the post-office with a boy on its back, or a gallop round the park with Scruton, junior, in the saddle. These little excursions were believed rather to freshen him up than otherwise, and on his return it was considered that he was quite ready to go in the trap again, when, with a shake of his gallant little head, he boldly trotted off once more ; and I may parenthetically add that Scruton's pony is by no means the only little animal in the country that is similarly treated, and does the work of about three horses.

An augmented stud was, of course, necessary to begin with, and it was found indispensable to fit out the hunt servants afresh, concerning which Scruton hit upon a most brilliant idea.

Being up in town, he went one evening with a friend of dramatic tastes to one of the theatres where pieces are mounted most luxuriously, and was much struck by the handsomely furnished rooms wherein the action of the play proceeded.

His companion assured him that the decorations of these apartments were just what they seemed to be—good things out of the best shops ; and this set Scruton thinking. Before dinner he had, while glancing through the paper, noticed an advertisement of the sale by

auction of the scenery, dresses, and “properties” of an opera company, and among the items he had observed several huntsmen’s costumes. Probably they would go cheaply. With some alterations they could easily be made to fit the huntsman and whips of the Meadowmere; and from what Scruton saw upon the stage he had no doubt they would be in all respects desirable garments for the hunt.

The notion he at once propounded to his friend.

“I see there are a lot of huntsmen’s costumes at that sale next week. What sort of things would they be?” he asked.

“Capital! Just the thing for you, I should fancy, if you want anything of that sort. The *Der Freischütz* dresses would suit you down to the ground, I should think. Green tunics, broad leather belts—you would not want the spears, of course—and yellow bucket boots. They’d look awfully jolly on a horse—novel and out of the ordinary run,” his friend rejoined.

Scruton’s hopes faded. His innocent companion, an unadulterated cockney, had no idea of hunting attire, and could not understand the sensation which would have been created by the appearance of a huntsman and two whips in green tights and bucket boots. Scruton, rather scornfully, said this would not do.

“If you want the regular thing, have the suits out of the *Lily of Killarney*,” his friend suggested.

“What are they like?” Scruton asked.

“O, Melton all over, I should say—just like the

pictures you see, you know. Red coats, top-boots, knee-breeches, and caps. They sing a chorus—‘Yoicks! tally-ho!’ and that sort of thing—capital good chorus,” his friend replied.

Scruton’s hopes revived. These things would do, no doubt, and before he returned home he commissioned his friend to buy four of the complete suits if he could get them under ten pounds.

Here was one difficulty solved, for tailors are so cruelly expensive; and on the afternoon of the day of sale a telegram came down from London:—“Had to take the whole lot. Sixteen suits; but only gave fifteen pounds. Coming down by train to-night.”

Sixteen suits were no good; but, on the other hand, they were marvellously cheap, if anything like up to the mark; and, having seen the admirable manner in which things were done on the London stage, of this Scruton had no doubt.

Next morning a huge bundle was delivered together with a letter. He opened the former first. There were the coats, the breeches, and—what were these other square surfaces of something like leather? Scruton turned to the letter. “I hope you have received the hunting things all right, and that you like them. The breeches are rather thin, but I dare say that doesn’t matter; when you are tally-hoing ’cross country, you keep yourselves pretty warm, I expect. The ‘boots’ are not boots precisely, as you will see. The chorus fasten these things—sort of leggings—round their legs,

over their own boots. I don't suppose that will matter, and I know they looked uncommonly well in the opera. Write and say how they do. Yours always, FRANK BORDERS."

No. The boots were not "boots precisely," neither were the coats coats, nor the breeches breeches. These latter were apparently of stout canvas, while the coats were a thin species of serge or flannel, and the sort of leggings were by no means adapted for rough work in the open air, "uncommonly well" as they may have looked on the stage. In fact, the whole bundle was worth considerably less than the money to which it had been run up by those who had no doubt observed that an earnest outsider was bidding.

Scruton sorrowfully stowed away the obnoxious parcel in a top room, and it was not till some time afterwards that we heard particulars of his singular purchase. There was nothing for it but to drive into Meadton and perform the disagreeable operation of throwing good money after bad by ordering suits in the regular way.

Scruton then set seriously to work to economise in horse-flesh, and by extra cunning reimburse himself for the wasted fifteen pounds.

He possessed a fair knowledge of horses, and had he gone to Tattersall's, prepared to give a moderate price, would in all likelihood have picked up some beasts worth their corn. But Scruton knew a dealer who generally had something cheap in his stables; and

thither he proceeded in the vain hope that a 'cute and experienced man who passed his life in buying and selling horses would be beguiled into parting with quadrupeds for less than their value by a person very much less accustomed to such bargainings. It is not at all difficult to get a horse at a low price; but that this is not necessarily a cheap horse many gentlemen have before now discovered. In return for a cheque for not much over a hundred pounds, Scruton became the owner of four animals, for the arrival of which we waited anxiously at the meet on the day appointed for the beginning of the season.

Three of them duly appeared, one of the purchases, described as a very good-looking chestnut mare, being incapacitated; her near fore-leg had filled after an exercise canter on the Downs. Scruton himself was on a decent sort of bay horse, far the best of the lot, for which he had paid the, to him, large price of forty pounds. Certainly it began to make a noise when we got away and had crossed some three or four fields—a noise suggesting to the hearer the wheezing of a consumptive steam-engine; but Scruton scorned the idea that it was broken-winded.

"Some horses were like that," he very truly observed, and it is only fair to the animal to add that, whatever was the matter with him, he did not stop, but got through a tolerable day's work.

The huntsman was on another of the new ones, a really handsome brown, more like a coach-horse than a

hunter, but nevertheless good-looking. That there was something wrong somewhere seemed more than probable, from the fact that he had only cost twenty-four pounds; but Scruton had a plausible proverb to the effect that a good rider made a good horse, and took him on the chance of the "something" being not beyond remedy.

He had trotted in fine style before Scruton bought him, and this we soon found was his peculiarity. Through the fence which bounded the covert when we found the brown charged nobly, without an attempt at rising, and off he went at a tremendously hard trot. All endeavours to make him gallop were futile. If he broke for a moment he speedily relapsed into his trot, and after about ten minutes began to go very lame indeed on his near fore-leg.

We subsequently found that he was the winner of several trotting matches, and had broken down beyond hope of more than a very temporary patching up. One of Scruton's old horses was out for whoever wanted it most, and the huntsman being transferred to him, the big brown was led off limping piteously.

Our only Whip was on the third purchase, a very mealy chestnut, which "tittuped" along like a rocking-horse, requiring a great deal of coaxing at the smallest fence, and kicked hard whenever it was touched with whip or spur, without in the slightest mending its pace. The Whip was quite prevented from performing his duties, never being able to get near the hounds, though

the mealy chestnut placidly cantered along without any sign of distress.

Hounds and horses alike fared badly under the Scruton *régime*, which came to an end with an early close to the season.

Scruton was practically succeeded by a lady; for poor young Thynne, under the direction of a severe mother, who insisted that his position in the county required it, and that she was sure his uncle—Lord Pytchley—would wish it, was reluctantly compelled to take the hounds.

Money was no object, and Thynne, a feeble-minded, weak-eyed, and generally limp young man, paid all expenses. Thynne could ride a little, but hated the whole business, though he had not much trouble, as his mother kept a stern eye on the conduct of affairs. One of her first proceedings was to send for Vale, the huntsman, and tell him that she “wished the foxes’ skins to be preserved.” Poor Vale was aghast at the idea.

“How do you mean, ma’am?” he presently ventured to ask.

“I wish them brought to me, always,” she severely rejoined.

“But, ma’am, I can’t!” poor Vale said.

“And why not, pray?” she still more sternly desired to know, probably supposing that the “foxes’ skins” were a perquisite which the huntsman unlawfully claimed.

“Hounds eat ’em, ma’am!” Vale earnestly explained.

"Surely the hounds do not eat the *skins*? They do not eat the faces—the masks, I am sure!" said the dowager.

"No, ma'am, I cut off the brush and mask and pads, and the hounds have the rest—it's their due, ma'am!" poor Vale said, wondering what was coming next. The dowager's fond anticipation of a carriage-rug, or whatever it was she desired, consequently vanished.

She kept up her control, however, to the best of her ability, and was particularly severe when she heard of a blank day.

"So you did not kill a fox yesterday. How was that?" she asked Vale, one day when Wynnerly and I were calling at the Hall, and found him undergoing his periodical examination.

"No, ma'am. He went to ground in Mere Woods."

"Where is that?" says Lady Thynne.

"By Bradwyn Hall—in the Fallowfield country, ma'am."

"How did that happen? Could you not make the hounds go more quickly?" she inquires, as though Vale were not nearly up to his work, and glancing round at Wynnerly and myself as she speaks, as if to assure us that she takes care of our interests, little as we may think it. Poor Vale looks horrified, but is speechless, and receiving permission to go retires precipitately. It need hardly be added that Sir Henry's return was welcomed with enthusiasm.

X.

A WRANGLER.

AS a very general rule, men who hunt are cheery and good fellows.

Instances of jealousy, selfishness, and unkindness may, of course, be found in the hunting field, as elsewhere.

The strict order of precedence is not always observed at gates and gaps, even though by cutting in out of turn the pusher may run some risk of upsetting the horse that was there first, to say nothing of its rider's temper. One does not always experience vivid regret if a rival gets put down without hurting himself; and sometimes after a nasty spill, when the rider is more or less doubled up, and the horse with flying reins and stirrups is kicking up his heels in the distance, we are rather too apt to conclude upon insufficient premises that the victim is not really hurt, or that some friend will be sure to look after him, instead of pulling up and seeing whether we may not be of assistance.

Nevertheless I think it will not be disputed that there are few exceptions to the general proposition laid down above; but of course one now and then does come across

such exceptions, and the Meadowmere Hunt can furnish an example in the person of Captain Crookton, though it must at once be said out of justice to him that his surliness and ever ready criticisms of a condemnatory nature stop short at verbal utterances.

Nothing pleases the gallant Captain.

He dislikes the country, though he owns a fair slice of it. The hounds are full of faults, the servants inefficient, the master self-willed and overbearing, the fields either too numerous or else so scanty that the Hunt must go to the dogs—which, bad as it is in every respect, Crookton would apparently regard as a misfortune—and even the foxes themselves, to pursue his strictures to their logical conclusion, are disgracefully ignorant of their business.

It need hardly be added that the weather very rarely indeed meets with Captain Crookton's entire approbation, but that, on the contrary, he is accustomed to speak of the climate of his native land in objurgatory terms, much more remarkable for their vigour than their propriety.

If in the meteorological history of this island there ever was a day that pleased the Captain, it was one upon which we had not the pleasure of meeting him out hunting. Nor is it only actual occurrences which offend him. As a prophet of evil he holds high rank, and that anything can be going on favourably in any way he entirely disbelieves.

There he is—the neatly dressed man with greyish

whiskers—sitting by himself outside the covert, through which the remainder of the Hunt are wending their ways. Crookton is well mounted on a powerful iron grey, well up to his weight, and is tugging savagely at the reins to prevent the animal from following his companions, as he is disposed to do.

On seeing that a general move was being made through the covert, we mildly suggested that we had "Better be getting on, perhaps?"

"What for?" he asks, contemptuously. "There never was a fox here, and there never will be. When I see a rascal like that man of Hawley's leaning over a gate," and he nodded towards a keeper, who was looking on, "I know what it means, well enough."

"But he says there was a fox this morning," some one says.

"I dare say he does, and very likely there was this morning, and he knows where it is now. No. I'm not going on any such fool's errand. What Akerton ought to have done, as I told him, was to go to the Red Down Spinney. My man saw a fox there yesterday, and though Oldham is a bigoted Tory ass, at least he has the grace not to shoot foxes. You'd better go, if you think it worth while. I shall wait till you come out."

We do think it worth while, and in we go. Before Crookton has succeeded in convincing his horse that he does not intend to follow into the covert a whimper from Tuneable, quickly acknowledged by other hounds, proclaims a find, and the fox breaks some hundred

yards from where Crookton has placed himself—a great deal better luck than he deserves.

—“A mangy bagman, I’ll bet a thousand to one. Things were getting too scandalous there, and Hawley thinks this will retrieve the character of the place,” growls Crookton.

“Well, he’s leading the hounds at a good pace, at any rate,” says Scatterly, as we gallop along full swing, and to this undeniable proposition Crookton can only reply with a grunt.

Into a covert with dense undergrowth the hounds plunge, where for a time they seem at fault; and Crookton, after growing very angry at what he deemed the imminent probability of the fox being “headed by some confounded tailor,” proceeds to anathematise his groom for not putting on the bit he wanted to ride in, and to complain angrily of the total incapacity of saddlers in general, and the tradesman he honours with his patronage in particular, who is, beyond comparison, the biggest ass that ever spoilt good leather. The hounds stay for some time in the covert without hitting off the scent, and Crookton knows why.

“Find the fox? No! They don’t seem to, indeed, and no wonder! Akerton’s not happy unless his hounds are as fat as pigs. They don’t want to run, and couldn’t if they did. Let the brutes lie down before the fire and go to sleep, and they’d be happy,” observes the genial Captain.

“I really think they are treated very judiciously,”

somebody ventures to say. "Sir Henry takes enough pains with them, anyhow."

"A deuced sight too much pains. He's always trying experiments with some new blood, and what's the result? All the old excellences of the pack are disappearing, and we have a set of snipe-nosed brutes——"

"That find foxes, anyhow, and run them pretty hard!" cries the defender, as he crashes through the fence after the hounds, which are again in full cry down the vale; and we are spared the argument that would have resulted had anybody cared to take it up, as to the good and bad points common to snipe-nosed hounds.

On we go again, well in, it seems, for a fast thing, and for some time Crookton can find nothing to complain of except a clever bit of riding on the part of the first whip, who neatly saves a fall over some awkward rails, and draws from Crookton a muttered grumble to the effect that Tom is a deuced deal too fond of steeple-chasing, and if he thought more of his hounds and less of showing off, he would be very much better suited for his place.

"Well! If this is a bagman he's pretty fit to go!" Scatterly cries out, as his well-pumped horse bungles over some low rails and nearly lands on his head, and Crookton can only reply by a growl of disapprobation at something indefinite—not the pace, unless he would like it slower.

But rest is at hand.

We have all made up our minds that the fox is heading for Oakley Heath, probably beguiling the weary way with reflections on the comfortable and commodious earths which he imagines are open, though we know better. Suddenly, however, we bend away to the right, and gradually come to a check. The fox apparently knows the geography of the district better than we do, and at last we are reluctantly forced to the conclusion that we have lost him; whereat Crookton takes up his parable against drunken rascals who pass their days guzzling in public-houses, instead of attending to their work, the culprit against whose especial head maledictions are hurled being poor Bob Blake, the most hard-working and sagacious of earth-stoppers.

Once, however, we got a glorious "rise" out of Crookton, one that was well worth waiting for.

This was during the Scruton *régime*, when that quasi-benevolent person, after having had very bad luck, as he considered it, with the cheap screws he managed to pick up in strange places, was making a last desperate effort by the strictest economy to avert the horrid fate of being out of pocket. Scruton had clearly imagined that there must be a balance from the subscriptions which would at least pay his average expenses, but this now seemed improbable, and things were not only cut, but absolutely shaved down, for the purpose of, if possible, making both ends meet.

The Whip—we had only one—was mounted on a melancholy little dingy bay, which had an extraordi-

nary habit of "running" every now and then in the midst of a gallop—not trotting or ambling, but simply running with all four legs independent of each other; and with disagreeable frequency he would land over a jump on his knees, somewhat after the fashion of the young people in circuses when they spring over what I believe are known as "banners."

Crookton observed this one Thursday, when the old horse was worse than usual, taking a run after every gallop of a dozen strides, and, despite all Tom's care, toppling him over at two successive fences. These were of course gay times for Crookton, who really enjoyed himself; for not only were there plenty of legitimate pretexts for finding fault, but as a subscriber to the Hunt he felt that he had an undeniable right to express himself freely.

"Look at that wretched screw to-day! He'll break Tom's neck if the lad doesn't take care, before the day's over. I believe Scruton makes those brutes himself out of broken-down clothes-horses. The lad can ride, too, or could if he had a beast to carry him. I'll tell you what I'll do. For the credit of the Hunt I'll get a horse from my own man, and Tom may ride it till the end of the season," the Captain exclaimed, and speedily put his project into execution.

Tom was to go to Captain Crookton's private and particular dealer, bearing a letter instructing him to supply the best light-weight hunter he could part with for eighty guineas. That was the Captain's way of

doing business, and he found it answer; so Tom called for the letter, and it was arranged that he should go over the first day he could manage it, which would probably be on the following Monday.

On the Saturday we were out again, and Tom, who had abandoned the dingy bay, was on a chestnut mare, another of Scruton's bargains' apparently, for though a very decent-looking beast, she refused persistently, wheeling round and kicking at her fences.

"There's another of them!" Crookton said, contemptuously, as he watched the performance. "It's simply disgraceful to send a servant out to do his work on such a beast."

"Not a bad-looking sort," Wynnerly remarks, as we stand in a group, watching Tom's efforts to get the mare over the fence out of a covert which had been drawn blank.

"I can't say I agree with you," the Captain answers; "she's one of those light, flashy beasts that never last after Christmas, and are not fit to go half the days before. Go to a decent man, pay a decent price, and you'll get a decent horse—as you'll see on Tuesday, I hope. Another awkward brute you've got there, Tom. Where did she come from?" Crookton asks, as at length, with a snort, the mare bounds over the fence.

"This is your new one, sir. I got over to fetch her yesterday," Tom answers, touching his hat. "Hadn't time to bring her round to let you see her, sir, and know'd you would be out to-day."

I'm afraid we laughed; the idea of Crookton so angrily abusing his own horse from his own unexceptionable dealer was too good to be resisted.

It is freezing hard now, and Crookton is beyond all doubt girding bitterly at the abominable weather. Soon it will thaw, and then he will come out, and growl savagely at the heavy ploughs, and the rides through the coverts knee-deep in mud. In fine, Crookton—a generous, good-hearted fellow when it comes to the point—is a very pronounced type of that strange class of people who are never happy unless they have something to be miserable about.



XI.

AN AFTER-DINNER SPORTSMAN.

AS a very general rule the less a man talks about his own performances in the saddle the better for his own reputation and the comfort of his friends.

There are, of course, exceptions to every rule; as, for example, Dick Christian, whose "lecture," so full of pleasant and unconscious egotism—as from its style it needs must have been—is an abiding joy to all who know the Midlands, either by experience or hearsay. "The Druid" did good service when he interviewed the gallant veteran, and obtained from him those stories which he loved to repeat for the edification of a sympathetic listener. The knowledge, too, that all the old man's statements were strictly accurate lent a charm to his narrative which all stories of sport certainly do not possess; as in the case of Herbert Fluffy, who has lately settled amongst us, and who goes wonderfully straight and well after dinner, or even at breakfast, especially after a glass of curaçoa and brandy, but who does not appear to equal advantage when hounds are running.

"On their own merits modest men are dumb," has

been said, and if men swagger, the inference may generally be drawn that they are not modest, or that their own merits are, for the most part, imaginary.

If we abstain from discussing ourselves, we may be tolerably sure that our friends will discuss us. One wag will suggest that we "go straightest in a hansom cab," and another will delicately, but decidedly, express an opinion that we are not so good as we were; and, with a hint that we were never worth much in our best days, this will sum up the question with tolerable conciseness.

Fluffyer differs from Mr. Checkley, who was introduced at an early period of these sketches, because the latter never says that he rides, while Fluffyer, with considerable *insouciance*, will describe most wonderful feats which he has accomplished—in imagination. Mr. Checkley would be glad to give you the impression that he goes like a bird, but has scruples of conscience, or is wisely deterred by a dread of being found out.

Fluffyer has no such fears, and gets out of the little difficulties into which his fables lead him with, it must be admitted, remarkable cleverness.

The first time I saw him I was riding with Wynnerly across the country over which they had hunted the day before—I had been away, and only just returned—and noticed a dog-cart pull up at the gate of the field at the far end of which we were. A man got down, opened the gate, and walked slowly along the fence.

"What's he doing?" I asked.

"I can't make out," Wynnerly said, looking carefully; and presently he exclaimed, "Why, its Fluffyer!"

"Who's he?" I inquired.

"A wonderful good rider; cuts us all down, and does marvels."

"Really?" I ask, Wynnerly's tone having a shade of sarcasm in it.

"Ask him, my dear fellow. He says so, and of course he ought to know. What the deuce is he at?" Wynnerly inquired as we approached, and saw Fluffyer draw from his pocket a little round silver contrivance about the size of a crown. "Come on; we shall have some fun!" he said, as he rode up to the mysterious Fluffyer.

"Good morning! what's your little game out here all by yourself? By the way, let me introduce my friend. Mr. Rapier—Mr. Fluffyer."

"Good morning!" Fluffyer answered. "I just came to measure the jump that we crossed yesterday. I don't think you came this way, did you? I fancy I saw you in the next field just before. My bay horse simply flew over here, and I thought I would see what we cleared."

"A very good way," Wynnerly declared, as grave as a judge. "You measure it carefully, and then you are satisfied."

"Quite so. Then there can be no doubt about it," Fluffyer answered.

"Quite so," Wynnerly replied in turn, though not perhaps in accents of pure conviction. "I was away to the right there, in a much easier place."

Fluffyer smiled as if the easiest places to him were what other people regard as yawners. "See here," he went on, revealing the fact that the little silver machine contained a yard measure; "we took off at least five feet from the fence, it's at least six feet through, that's eleven; the ditch is six—say seven—that's eighteen; and I'm sure we cleared it by four feet on the other side—that's twenty-two. I should have thought it was more."

"A very good jump, though. Not many of us would have cared about it," Wynnerly hypocritically says; and Fluffyer, immensely delighted, answers, "Oh! don't know. It isn't much!"

"How do you account for being such a wonderful good rider?" Wynnerly asks, while I look on in fear lest even the weak-minded Fluffyer should see that he is being chaffed; but he accepts the little compliment without the faintest suspicion.

"I don't think that I'm out of the way—far from it; that's to say of course I *do* ride. It's simply a question of pluck, judgment, and experience. There's really very little credit due to a man who goes straight, after all. Pluck is a matter of constitution—it's born with you—"

"Or it isn't," Wynnerly breaks in.

"Quite so. It's no credit to you if you have it, I

mean. Then judgment is the result of experience, and, of course, I've had a good deal of experience in hunting. Well, good-bye, old man; it's rather damp on the grass, and I must be getting on. Good morning, Mr. Rapier. We shall meet to-morrow, I dare say?"

"Did he jump that fence?" I ask, as we canter along.

"Jump it? No, not he. Scrambled through and got over the ditch, and vows he flew the whole thing with a few yards to spare. The queerest part of the business is that he really believes what he tells you. We shall see him out to-morrow, but you won't see him jump many big fences. I believe he left Staffordshire because they chaffed him so, though I can't make out what they said to him; for he never seems to see the most outrageous joke at his own expense, just as he swallowed what I said about his riding."

Next morning we met at the Cross Roads, and early on the spot was Fluffy, gorgeously arrayed in spotless pink, the whitest of buckskin breeches, the shiniest of boots with delicate cream-coloured tops, these latter being shielded from splashes of mud by a species of apron attached to leathern wings fastened to the saddle on each side. He was mounted on a well-bred brown mare, a likely-looking hunter of apparently a very temperate disposition. We exchanged greetings, and I made some complimentary remarks about his mount.

"Yes," he admitted, with a thin assumption of

modesty, "she's a good old mare. Rather wild sometimes, and has some awkward tricks, but luckily I'm used to her. Where are we going to draw?"

"That gorse," Downing answered. "It's a sure find, and if we get away the other side of the common it's a splendid country."

"Isn't the Swish somewhere in that direction?" Scatterly asks. "It's a big brook we have to cross sometimes—that is of course to say, if we can," he explained for the edification of Fluffier, who was new to the country. "I hope you are on a good jumper?"

"Pretty fair, thanks," Fluffier replies, patting his mare's neck; and then, as a move is evidently about to be made, removing the coverings which have preserved the spotlessness of his garments.

We skirt the gorse, from the other end of which a big dog-fox presently steals away, and is half across the next field before the hounds have hit off the scent. Then, with a rush, the field is off after them, the first fence being so very small and thin that no man shrinks from making his way either over or through, and on we tear, Fluffier looking back and apparently wondering whether it would be worth while to measure his jump. After this for some time I lose sight of him, but at the first check he turns up, remarks with some satisfaction that this is a good beginning, at any rate, and asks if we saw him do the fence in the bottom. I had happened to observe him at the spot in question, and noticed that he trotted through without the

necessity for anything in the shape of a jump; but concerning this I held my peace.

"They're running, aren't they?" Scatterly suddenly asks, looking straight away over a set of posts and rails immediately in front of us. "Yes. Hold up!" he cries to his horse, as the animal stops and "slithers" down to the rails with no attempt at jumping. Wheeling round, he canters up to them again, but they are a good deal stiffer than the horse cares about, though the rider is willing enough, and another refusal is the consequence.

"Give me a lead, somebody! Wynnerly, your horse is sure to go," the disconcerted one exclaims. But Wynnerly winks slightly at me, and says,—

"I'm not so sure, he's rather a brute. Ah! Fluffy will show us the way. Will you go?"

Fluffy is not at all eager to do anything of the sort; but if he is not ready to jump rails he is quite ready to explain the reason of his forbearance.

"My dear fellow," he says, "if I were on any other horse in my stable there's nothing I should like better, but this mare won't rise an inch at timber. It's her only fault. At water she's the best I ever rode."

Wynnerly smiles, not altogether without derision; but Fluffy does not see it, being occupied with the recalcitrant mare.

"I suppose I must try, then," Wynnerly says, and slips over with consummate ease; while Scatterly's

horse blunders and smashes the two top ones, without, however, coming to grief.

"Strange thing about the mare, that she won't rise at timber, isn't it?" Fluffy says, as we cross the next field, feeling that some sort of excuse is necessary. "She's so good and clever at everything else, but you saw she didn't half like even that low rail that Scatterly left unbroken? They seem to be bearing rather to the right, don't they? Through that gate is the quickest way, I fancy;" and he gallops off, right away from the line, to escape the fence in front of us, which the first flight are over and the second are engaged upon.

Soon after we join again, and Wynnerly says,—

"Now you'll have a chance with your water-jumper, Fluffy. We are going straight for the Swish, and it's pretty big, too, after the rain."

"Where is it?" the after-dinner sportsman asks, not exactly in eager tones.

"Straight ahead, in the field by the clump of trees there," Wynnerly replies, and into the field we gallop, numerous splashes showing where hounds are jumping in. Sir Henry, the master, is in his usual place, well with the hounds, and over it he goes in gallant style. Keen as Wynnerly is he cannot resist the fun of chaffing Fluffy, and he encourages him to the attempt.

"Go on, old man, and give us a good lead over!" he cries; and poor Fluffy, in a mortal funk, has no excuse ready.

"All right!" he feebly answers, and goes towards the water; but his pace gradually decreases, and the mare, feeling that he does not mean it, comes to a stop at the brink.

"Try again, she'll do it!" Wynnerly shouts. Fluffyer, however, shakes his head.

"No! There must be something wrong with her. I felt her going queerly a little way back. I'm afraid she's hurt herself;" whereupon he slips from the saddle and begins to feel the mare's legs with an affectation of deep anxiety. Wynnerly grins, and the next moment is on the other side of the brook. Scatterly promptly jumps into the middle, while Downing and some of the more cautious spirits go along the bank to a ford, of whose existence Fluffyer was unaware. His mare evidently wanted to follow, but he was bound to keep up the imposture, and actually led her across the field in the opposite direction to that in which we were going.

I am afraid that the events of the day gave no opportunity for an entry in the book of big jumps.

XII.

THE DEALER.

OCCASIONALLY among the followers of the Meadowmere Hounds, with which I usually hunted, and more often with a neighbouring pack which came within reach of us at intervals, I was accustomed to notice a stranger, whom I mentally called the Major, from his close resemblance to a gallant officer whose name was pretty generally known.

The Major appeared to be a reserved man. He never accorded to me that cheery greeting which pursuers of the same foxes soon came to exchange even without having previously gone through the ceremony of a formal introduction; neither was he, as a rule, communicative to other members of the hunt, though at times I observed him exchanging salutes with men as they cantered past, his portion of the exchange consisting of a military inclination of two fingers to the brim of his hat.

The Major was somewhat tall—or looked so on his horse—but slim in proportion, and rode well under twelve stone. His whiskers were rigorously shaved off in a line with the lobes of his ears; a black double-

seamed coat, cord breeches, and butcher boots formed his invariable attire; but what chiefly attracted my attention were the horses he rode and the manner in which he rode them.

Almost always his mount was a young animal that could certainly not have had much experience of the chase, and seemed to be more than likely in the course of a run to disconcert that perfect equanimity which was the Major's most prominent characteristic.

So a casual observer would have supposed. But though often excitable on first coming among the other horses—or rather into their neighbourhood, for the Major generally sat by himself a little apart from groups of chatting and smoking sportsmen, attended only by a servant—by some means the colt was speedily reduced to placidity; and when it came to running, the manner in which the pair acquitted themselves was delightful and withal marvellous to behold.

Between horse and rider, as between husband and wife, the secret of travelling successfully over the obstacles which mark alike the hunting field and the matrimonial existence is only known to those who understand each other; and, indeed, chiefly consists of that understanding.

By what subtle means the Major impressed upon a four-year-old that he must not plunge and fight with his rider at the covert-side I must regretfully confess my ignorance, but this lesson he was certainly fortunate in conveying. If I ride a young horse he bucks and kicks,

or at any rate, as a very general rule, fidgets considerably and uncomfortably when he joins his companions ; and as the whimper which hints at a find swells into a chorus of conviction, gives such tokens of exuberant delight as effectually prevent me from criticising with Mr. Checkley the manner in which the hounds are working.

There was no vulgar whipping, spurring, and shouting on the Major's part when premonitory symptoms of unruliness set in. His gentle admonitions were imperceptibly conveyed ; and, reduced to perfect quietude, his young horse appeared to share his rider's desire to get away without any fuss or nonsense on a good line of his own.

Evidently the Major preferred schooling young ones, for his green-coated groom was invariably mounted on a finished hunter, which always appeared to the best advantage in his skilful hands. The Major's stud was endless, and the number of young horses he had for his own riding, and of made hunters for his groom or grooms—sometimes there were two of them—would apparently have filled the stables of the master of the Meadowmere and of his two neighbouring brethren.

At times, moreover, the Major was accompanied by a young lady, for whom, amongst his resources, he was always able to find a mount whose appearance matched her pretty face, and whose good qualities were abundantly evident under the gentle but firm hands of its accomplished mistress.

When the Major did get away, too, there was no mistake about his style of going. His young horses became possessed of a discretion beyond their years. They neither refused their fences nor rushed them, but slipped over, bringing their hind-legs well under them, and, lighting on those agile and muscular limbs, were well away on the other side, while the rushers, who had jumped at double the pace, were pulling themselves together, and getting into their stride again—if they found their way safely over, as was not invariably the case.

My introduction to the Major was brought about accidentally. A gate through which I was passing swung back more rapidly than I expected, and missing the push with my hunting-crop, that should have warded off a collision, the lock caught my stirrup and dragged it off. An attempt to fish it up without leaving the saddle was unsuccessful, and I did not want to dismount if it could be avoided, as that necessarily involved mounting again, which is not a very easy ceremony to perform when your horse is restive and the plough deep.

At this juncture, therefore, I was much gratified to find that the Major had courteously slid from his saddle, and with a most polite "Pray allow me, sir," handed me up the leather and iron. His legs were longer than mine, and his horse both quieter and lower, so that he was again in his seat before I could utter a fitting expression of thanks and of shame to have given him so much trouble; to which civil speeches he made suitable

response as we cantered on together towards where the hounds had checked a couple of fields beyond.

If the Major had struck me as being reserved, he was unquestionably most polite of speech, and as we proceeded onward we naturally verged into the subject of horse-flesh, which enabled me to pay a well-deserved compliment to the four-year-old iron-grey horse he was riding.

"A good-looking young horse you are on to-day—sir," I said, just stopping in time to avoid saying "Major."

"Yes; I think he will grow into a serviceable animal," he replied, glancing as he spoke down the fence we were approaching, and over which his groom, on a raking chestnut mare, bounded in the most irreproachable form. "My servant is on the pick of my stable this morning," he continued; "but I was anxious to see what the young one was like."

It would only have been courteous, I thought, if the Major had said something amiable about my horse, a nearly thoroughbred bay, which came very near indeed to my *beau idéal* of a hunter; and presently he did glance over my steed, slightly—very slightly—contracting his eyebrows as his eyes fell on the animal's near hind-leg. I, too, had looked at that hock several times before writing rather a stiff cheque. Was it just a little full? and, if so, what could have caused it? Spavin is such an ugly word I did not like to think of it, and had succeeded in persuading myself that it was all right; but the Major's glance falling just on

what had laboured under suspicion of being a weak place was disquieting.

"A very useful little horse, that, sir, I should say—especially when it isn't too heavy going?" was his commendation, and it sounded very like an adverse criticism. "For a cramped country that is just the stamp of horse I like."

Now we do not consider our country cramped; the adjective "useful" seemed to me to fall far short of my steed's deserts, and the reservation about the too heavy going, particularly when taken in conjunction with the term "little," meant, if it meant anything, that the animal was overweighted. In common with many of my species, I entertain views as to the value of my own opinion, as opposed to the opinions of the world in general, which—well, which perhaps my friends don't share with me. Still, the judgment of a man who rode like the Major was not to be despised, and when I saw his eye wander once more to that hind-leg I began to feel doubts and dissatisfactions in striking contrast to the sentiment of serene content I had experienced as I rode that morning into the field.

"That black-and-white hound has it. No? Yes!" he suddenly exclaimed, as a whimper half-way between a query and an assertion drew affirmative responses from the pack, and they crashed through a thorn fence. "Surely that boy of mine doesn't mean to have those rails?" he cried, as the chestnut mare went straight for some excessively ugly timber rather out of the line

which led over the thinnish fence aforesaid. "He does, though! Splendidly done!" he continued, as the mare bounded over without suspicion of a touch.

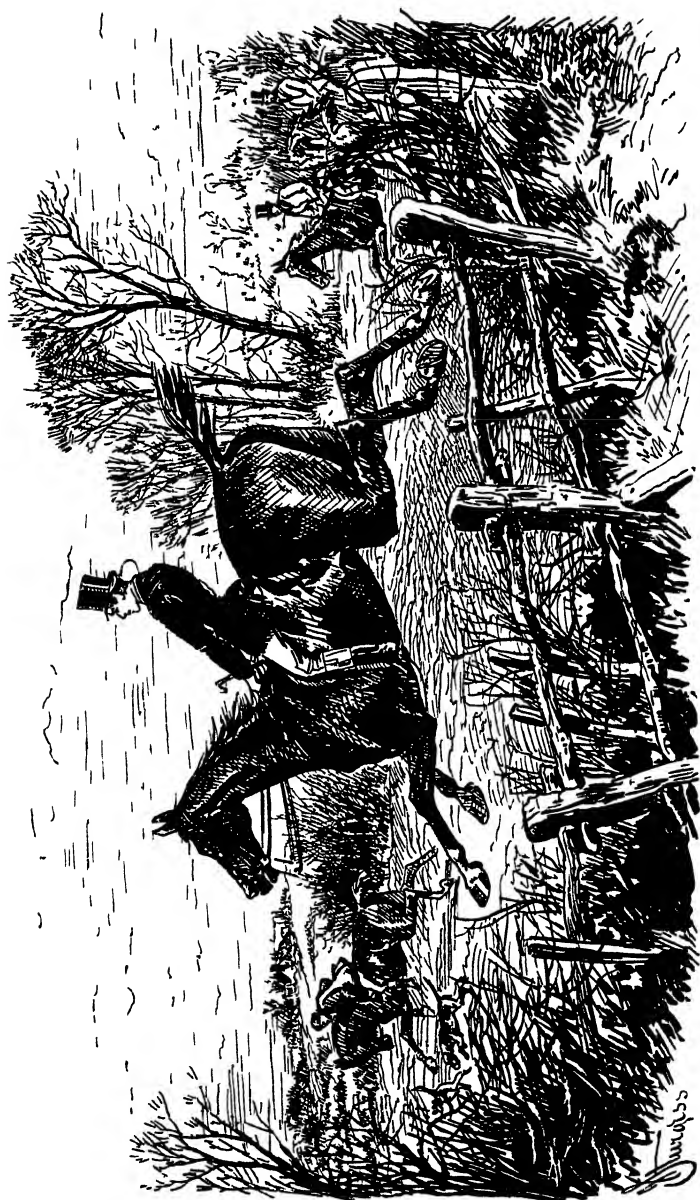
"Yes," I replied; "it must be a man's own fault if he fails to keep his place on that mare, I should think. Have you many up now?" I asked, as we went smoothly over the grass.

"Pretty full, just at present, sir, and I should be very happy if you would come and look at them some day," he replied.

"You are very good, I'm sure, and I should be delighted," I said, much pleased with my companion's affability, and likewise at the prospect of an afternoon's visit to such a stable as the Major's must be.

"I sha'n't hunt on Friday, if you care to ride over, sir?" he rejoined, handing me a card; and before I could answer his invitation we approached another section of the rails over which his mare had distinguished herself. My perfect beast stopped dead at them, while the Major, coming up on his young one a length behind, shot over with considerable ease, just faintly tapping the top with a fore-foot, but not enough to disconcert horse or rider in the least.

A second attempt carried me over, or rather through, for a broken rail was the consequence of an effort with too much steam on, and at the next check, to which a particularly dodgy fox speedily brought us, I found myself near a friend.



"SPLENDIDLY DONE!"

"What a good fellow the Major seems," I remarked to him, as that gallant officer landed in the field some distance from us.

"Yes, don't he, charming—who are you talking about?" he replied.

"The man on the grey," I answered, pointing him out.

"Why 'the Major'?" he asked. "I'm not aware that he's a major, except in the sense of being an old soldier, perhaps. That's Scratton the dealer."

"He talks like a gentleman," I said, looking at his card which, sure enough, was inscribed "Mr. Scratton, The Farm, Coverton." "Do you know him? What sort of a fellow is he?" I asked my friend.

"Well, he's a horse-dealer," I was again informed.

"So you said; but is he all right?"

"For a horse-dealer, I dare say he is," my friend drily answered, evidently entertaining the common prejudice, which may or may not be well founded, as to the integrity of the race.

On the Friday, however, I determined to ride over; and, at any rate, have a look at what was to be seen at The Farm; and an hour's trot, with a gallop over Coverton Common, brought me in sight of Scratton's establishment—an old-fashioned, high-roofed, red-tiled house, with what had been farm buildings, and were now stables, stretching to the right and back.

In a field near the house some flights of hurdles had been placed, over which Scratton was persuasively

handing another of his young ones, while a boy on a good-looking old hunter was standing by, ready, I supposed, to give an occasional lead if necessary; and beyond this field on the common I perceived lines of fences of various sizes carefully made up and rendered unfit for the use of casual passers-by who might be inclined to jump, by chains fastened to posts about a couple of yards on the landing side. My "Major" dismounted as I rode up and saluted me in his accustomed fashion, as a groom came forward to take my horse.

"I trust you will permit me to offer you a little luncheon, sir, after your ride?" he courteously inquired, leading the way to a parlour where a snowy cloth was laid, and bright glasses and shining plate caught the reflections of a comfortable fire. It was evidently his *rôle* to play the host and not the horse-dealer; and while we discussed some excellent chops, the mealiest of potatoes, the brightest of ale, and a glass of perfect dry sherry, the subject of horse-flesh was not touched upon.

A cigar, which did no discredit to the luncheon, duly followed; and then, as if making a casual suggestion for the purpose of amusing a guest, and without the faintest thought of trade, my host carelessly observed, "Shall we look through the stables?" to which, on my acquiescing, he led the way.

If I were a horse I should wish no better fate than to be quartered at Scratton's, at any rate so far as board and lodging are concerned.

Pleasantly warm, without being in the least close, scrupulously clean and beautifully neat in those little details which concern appearance as well as health and comfort, Scratton's stables must have been a home which their inmates quitted with regret; for here the happy mean was evidently reached, and the horses neither suffered from the carelessness on the one hand, nor the excessive pampering on the other, which bring on so many of the complaints that equine flesh is heir to.

Overfeeding, want of regular exercise, and the atmosphere of a stable the temperature of a hothouse do more damage than many kind masters imagine.

"Fine horse that!" I exclaimed, as a groom, at a signal from his master, loosened the clothes on a big thoroughbred-looking brown.

"He is indeed, sir; almost the best horse in my stable. He carried the Marquis of W—— so well through the great run last season at Blackbrook that the gentleman I bought him from wrote next morning to offer 600 guineas. He was too much of a horse for his new owner, however, and I was glad to give the price for him. That's the mare my servant was on last Tuesday; I picked her up very cheap in Ireland at the sale of Lord Wallaway's stud—£200—a great bargain and a beautiful jumper; do you care to try her over the hurdles? Perhaps she's scarcely up to your weight, sir," he continued, seeing that I hesitated, for though disposed to buy a horse if I found one that I cared for,

I was not inclined to deal for animals which had been picked up cheaply for 600 guineas, or even £200. Considering the expense of carriage from Ireland, keep, &c., and a reasonable profit for the dealer, which one could not fairly refuse, the price would mount up speedily to considerable dimensions.

"That is a hack my daughter rides," he went on, as we passed to the next stall, which contained a splendid little bay mare, "and this is Gloucester; he runs in the Grand Military next week, and will not be far from winning, I imagine;" and he pointed to the occupant of a capacious loose box, a powerful black horse which put back his ears and swished his tail as the door of his residence was opened. "The iron-grey by the door is a young one I rode last season, half-brother to the one I was on last Tuesday; capital hunter, rising six."

"Does he jump?" I ask.

"And gallop," he answered. "Do you care to take him round the training ground? I can have it unchained in a moment."

"Just over the hurdles will do," I reply, not quite caring about the unknown obstacles of what no doubt seemed a moderate course to Scratton, but might have had a different appearance to a stranger on a young horse. A neatly-fitting saddle was on the grey's back in a moment, and over the hurdles he certainly bounded as if he liked nothing better.

Perhaps, as a short time afterwards we discussed another glass of the sherry, Scratton painted the grey's

good qualities a little too brightly, and it would not be correct to call him a cheap horse. To haggle with Scratton is, however, impossible. You would lower your own dignity, destroy the agreeable spirit of the intercourse which has existed between you, hurt his feelings, and not abate his price. Indeed, he would not haggle, I am sure, though I do not speak from experience.

He mentions the price of his horse, and you can take it or leave it, as you please. He does not puff his animals, though he may take the opportunity of drawing your attention to the manner in which they are going in the field with his servants on their backs; which is a perfectly legitimate proceeding. The fact of a horse being in his stable is supposed to stamp it as sound and serviceable, and just a little out of the common. He does not, of course, depreciate his horses, and if you ask straightforward questions he gives straightforward answers: if he seemed to say a little too much in favour of my grey, it was because I inquired into details.

He does not sell unsound horses—one simple reason being that it would not pay him to do so. If I wanted another horse I should go to Scratton, and the man who wants a wife and succeeds in persuading Scratton's daughter to accept the position, will, I should imagine, marry a very good girl with a substantial dowry.

XIII.

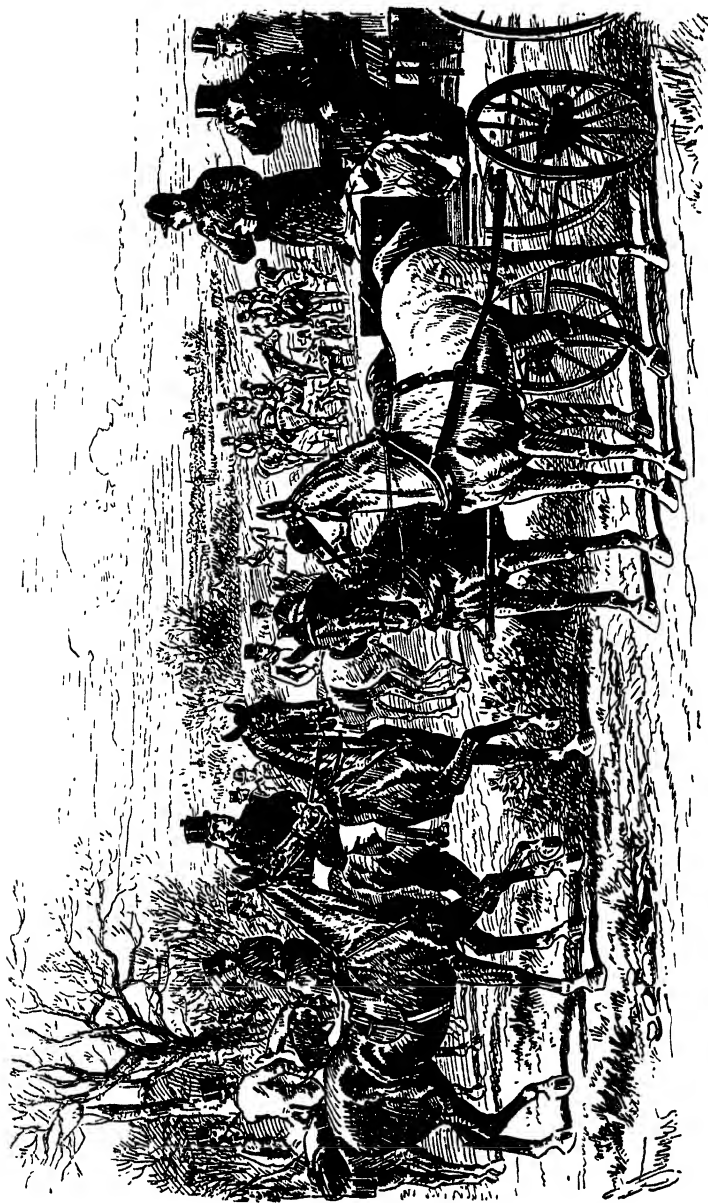
THROWN OUT.

It *is* cold as we drive to the meet, bitterly and—for the 24th of March—cruelly cold. The wind whistles round the turned-up collar of my great-coat, and has a most offensive habit of finding its way through interstices. The Huntsman of the famous pack we are going to meet is driving, and even he finds it cold, though arrayed in a huge fur coat, which makes him look like something between a sheep and a bear; and he shelters me somewhat from the nipping and eager air that cuts like a knife, or I should be able to discuss frost-bites with Major Burnaby from personal experience.

This is not the weather for sitting still outside a covert, but that is an amusement in which we shall scarcely be called upon to take part; for there are foxes about, and if any pack of hounds can find them it is that which is going to try to-day.

“Looks like December, doesn’t it?” I growl to my companion on the hind seat.

“Feels like it, by Jove!” he answers, from the recesses of a high collar which almost meets the brim of his hat. But if this be not the weather for driving it does



"THAT'S YOURS—THE CHESTNUT MARE."

not much matter, as driving is not the business of the day.

Soon we begin to pass horsemen jogging along the road, some of them servants with led horses; and rounding the next turning we see a group of horsemen in blue coats relieved by buff, in black, in tweed, and two or three in red to brighten the picture; while several horsewomen in picturesque habits add charming variety to the scene.

"That's yours—the chestnut mare before the next carriage there," says my host's son, as I laboriously unload myself and doff the protecting great-coat. "I'm sure you will like her," he continues, as the chestnut mare is led up, and I notice that with the thoughtful kindness which my friend inherits he has remembered my preference for a padded saddle, and substituted one for the plain flaps almost invariably used in the stables here.

Poor Whyte-Melville was eloquent in favour of plain flaps, and they are doubtless most comfortable and convenient to those accustomed to them; but to men who are used to padded saddles, the substitution of the unpadded flaps makes the rider wonder where he is going to on the other side of even a moderate jump.

On the chestnut mare's easy saddle I am soon seated, and gladly accept the suggestion of a gallop round a big grass-field to set the blood in brisk circulation. Eagerly the mare springs forward, and I at once experience the delights of a perfect mount. The free

and bounding stride is so smooth and easy, she skims the inequalities of the field so gently, plays with her bit so good-temperedly, and answers every touch of the rein so willingly—together a hunter in a thousand.

The exercise restores the healthy glow to a half-frozen body. Fingers may still be cold, but on such a glorious mare as this he must indeed be an ungracious churl who would find fault with wind, weather, or any sublunary ills; and besides, in advance of us trot eighteen couple of hounds. The Huntsman has abandoned the thick furs for the glories of green and gold, and down the lane we merrily trot with a joyful expectation of what is to come.

The hounds turn in at a gate and trot gaily towards a covert to the left; the Master, some half-dozen horsemen with him, follows a little way and checks his horse, while the bulk of us wait for what is going to happen next. And we have not to wait long. The Master takes his horse by the head and gallops on in answer to the halloo which has rung through the keen, sharp air; some of the field crash through the hedge, others crowd through the gate, and we are away with a vengeance at a rattling pace. The story of a fox lying out in the hedge was true enough, and if he proposes to lie out in a hedge any more—or elsewhere, for the matter of that—he must run for it to-day.

Away we stream over the pastures and over a ploughed field by way of a change, my enthusiasm for the mare

increasing at every stride. We are in a big meadow now, and surely as the field approach the middle of it there is some sort of break in the even pace of the horses. A brook? Yes. As we come nearer I see it, and the next moment we are on the other side. Had I not seen it I should hardly have known that we had crossed it at all, with such slight exertion does the mare bound over.

On we go, the field now breaking into two divisions, one making for the gate to the right, and the other steaming away straight ahead. What shall we do? The fence is the most direct way, and on such a mare there is no excuse for hesitation. To it we come. A couple of men fly it; another jumps short—his horse catches his fore-legs in the ditch and turns over. Our turn now! Here is an easy place, let us see how Village Lass will manage it.

On to the bank she lightly springs and simply glides over the ditch on the other side. It is just like handing a lady out of a carriage—no more fuss or exertion, and she shakes her little head as she gallops over the field beyond. These are, indeed, moments to live for, carried on such a mare across such a country; for that she will go all day, and like it the better the farther she goes, I have been assured on the most unimpeachable authority.

A slight check gives us time to appreciate the pleasures of the moment more fully, and down a lane, fresh stoned in the cartruts, we trot.

"How do you like the mare?" asks my host's son, and before I have time to frame a sentence, a movement in front shows that something is up. The hounds have hit it off again, and through the gateway opposite to which we have just arrived we all stream; for the stone wall here is too high and forbidding even for the careless ones.

What is the matter with the mare? She certainly goes very lame indeed on her near fore-leg—a stone, no doubt, out of that lane; unlucky enough at such a moment, but it is fortunate at least that I happened to bring to-day a stout, serviceable, hunting-crop with an iron handle, instead of the more smart and very much less useful silver one I sometimes carry.

The mare knows why I have left my saddle, and holds up the lame foot, from which I speedily detach the small rock she was carrying, and though she stands quietly enough, it is necessary to turn her about to get a little advantage in the ground before I am again in my seat.

There is a covert ahead, round the left of which the last of my detachment is just disappearing, and I pause for a moment to consider. The field seemed to be going away to the right, and if I go too I shall in all probability get ahead of my late companions, so I set the mare going and gallop along the fence, intending to skirt the covert to join in; but here, at any rate, it is plain why the knowing ones went the other way. An impenetrable fence with a ditch towards me most effectually bars the way, and so to the right again I turn, and trot along to

find a way through. There is a stream, evidently fordable, by the marks of many horses' hoofs, and Village Lass paddles through, landing again in a spreading meadow.

I look to the left, and see nothing; to the right, expecting and finding the same result. Where are the hounds, and where the field? A couple of rustics are looking hard; one is pointing off in the distance, and to them I gallop.

"Seen the hounds?" I ask.

"No, sir; but we seen the fox!" one of them replies. "He come out by that there oak-tree, run along the ditch, and jumped out by that bush, and went across the corner of the field along that hedge, sir. Fine big fox he was, too," both of them declare in breathless haste.

"A dog-fox, was he?" I ask.

"I don't know, sir—warn't near enough to see; but he was a rare big 'un," the first speaker replies. And so I sit still, expecting every moment to hear the voices of the hounds, and the familiar sound of their passage through the crackling undergrowth.

The rustics continue their way, leaving me alone, waiting and listening. Where are the hounds? I wonder, and the query is unsatisfied. Where on earth are those hounds? Nothing happens to inform me. Where the deuce can those hounds have got to? I presently feel justified in inquiring, while the mare pricks her ears as if she would help if she could, but cannot.

My friends possibly saw a fox, but not the one that was being hunted.

On ahead, or back the way I came and after the last men I saw ?

Back seems safest, perhaps, as I have no certain knowledge of the direction the others took ; and back I go, across the stream, cut the corner of the field, round the corner, and see—nothing ! A man ploughing in the distance with a span of oxen apparently, and no other living creatures in the landscape except a couple of rooks. Yet there is ? Yes ! A man in the middle of the next field, pointing at something straight before him for the edification, so far as I can see, of no one in particular.

Up to him I canter, and as we approach pull up suddenly with, I fear, a not altogether moral exclamation.

The man is a scarecrow, and knows precisely as much about the hounds as I do myself. The ploughman may possibly be better informed, and to him I go next.

“Seen the hounds ?” I ask.

“I see ’em one day last week, sir ; I ain’t seen ’em since,” he answers quite seriously, for I look sharply at him to see whether there be any humour lurking under his stolid countenance. Suddenly, moreover, it strikes me that it is uncommonly cold, a fact which I had lately forgotten ; and in what direction to jog in order to find my friends I have no vestige of an idea. The whole hunt has passed away like a dissolving view.

On I trotted, straight forward, and for a long time

met no one. At length a labourer, with a bundle of faggots on his shoulder, came in sight, but "Noa, sur," was his answer to my question whether he had seen the hounds. This was some guide, but a very small one, and turning a little aside from the way he had come we trotted on until we reached the high road.

"Seen the hounds?" I asked the driver of a waggon, and the irritating answer, "Noa, sur," came out once again. There in a field to the left are some men, and up to them I ride and put my question.

"Noa, sur; but I seen a fox. He came out of that withy bed, and run across the field," one of them answered; but I have no intention of going on a solitary expedition in search of a fox, and once more pursue my lonely way. A big town is not far in front; into this and over a bridge we go, and then into the country beyond. Possibly we may be more lucky this side of the river.

"Seen the hounds?" I once more ask a labourer.

"Oi bleeve ounds goa up sheepen ood," he answers.

"What do you say, my man?" I ask in a friendly way, for there may be some information under this mystic utterance.

"Oi bleeve ounds goa up sheepen ood way a," he answers slowly, and I feel that a continuance of the conversation can be hardly productive of any beneficial results.

"Ah! yes, thank you," I answer, and go on my unenlightened way.

At any rate he did not say "Noa, sur," and that was something, so with hope faintly reilluminated I trot on down the road. A waggoner is coming towards me.

"Seen the hounds?" I ask.

"Noa, sur," he returns, and the faint hope is again extinguished. In front, however, I see a farmer who has just come out of a field into the road, and to him I put the too familiar question.

"I heard them just now, sir. They've gone on to Shipton Wood," he says.

"Thank you!" I return heartily. "Whereabouts is that?"

"That big wood you see over there, sir," he answers. "If you go down the road for about half a mile, you will find a lane leading to it." And with another "Thank you very much," away I trot once more. There is the lane, surely enough; in fact there are two lanes, and which did he mean? Both lead to gates into fields, and either seems equally direct to the wood.

This one to the right is perhaps the best, and though the gate will not open, a convenient gap lets me through. But the other side of the field there is a big, thick, black bullfinch, and much as I desire to be the other side of the fence, I do not propose to reach it by the rash expedient of jumping. No horse, unless he was a cannonball—to paraphrase Sir Boyle's unconscious witticism—could make certain of arriving, and altogether it seems we have taken the wrong road.

But stay! Surely to the right there, a horn is sound-

ing? I can see nothing, but can hear it plainly enough; there it is again, so after it let us go. On we canter to a farm on the rising ground, and from a yard behind it comes the sound I have mistaken for a horn, apparently an unconcerted piece of music rendered by the animals. Certainly there is nothing in the shape of a hound, much less of a huntsman, and I am about to turn once again to the path to Shipton Wood—that, I now suspect, was what my incoherent rustic friend was driving at—when I actually do see a horseman descending the slope before me.

At last! It is four o'clock I see by my watch, but there is yet time for the long-deferred gallop, and the mare has had so little real work, that there is no need to seek my second horse; besides, I long to feel her striding away beneath me once again. The stranger approaches—a groom he seems to be: second horseman, probably.

“Where are the hounds?” I inquire, with a smile of anticipation.

“Haven’t come across them, sir,” he answers. “I’ve ridden from Newton, and didn’t pass them on the road;” and with a touch of the hat he goes on his way.

The best thing to be done is to try Shipton Wood, and back I go down the green lane, and along the course indicated by the farmer. There is a line of gates, and in this country gates are easily opened; so one side of the wood is soon reached. Horses have

been here recently, it is clear by their footprints, and down I trot to the banks of a pond—a veritable lake—which separates me from the covert. On both sides of me are impenetrable fences; before me is the water, and there is nothing for it but to turn and retrace my way.

When at last I reached Shipton Wood—to make a long story short—there is no trace of man, horse, or hound, and it is more than half-past four. I was thrown out at about half-past twelve—rather earlier than later—and ever since have been in search of the hunt. Clearly the best thing to do now is to go home, and I ask the first man I meet how far it is to my destination.

“About eight miles, sir,” he says; and I trot on for some twenty minutes, and ask once more if this is the way. It is. “And how far?” “Rather better than eight miles, sir,” is the answer. On again for a long trot, and another inquiry.

“About five miles, sir,” I am now told, and after riding some distance farther and asking again, am told that it is “nigh upon six.” Elastic as the road may be, it is straight, so on we pound for nearly an hour, when I once more inquire.

“You should have turned down to the left more than a mile back, sir,” I am informed by the girl whose assistance I have now sought; and when at length I get into the park, and have lost my way again, the house appears in sight, and I gallop down a grassy avenue to the stables.

In a huge easy-chair, by a comfortable fire, I recover my temper somewhat, and strive to believe that the future has in store many, or at least several, of such days as I have missed ; and the immediate prospect of an excellent dinner after a hard day's work reconciles me to inquiries as to "wherever I could have got to?" and "whatever I could have been doing?"

"We've had such a charming day—no standing about, galloping all the time," an enthusiastic young lady, who has held her own upon a "gallant grey," informs me.

Good and bad luck come in something like sandwiches in this possibly wicked, but not altogether unpleasant, world ; and I console myself with the reflection that fate owes me a good gallop, to compensate for the day when I was THROWN OUT.

March 24, 1879.

XIV.

A GENTLEWOMAN.

THE discussion as to whether or not ladies ought to hunt is answered by Crookton in an angry negative; and when the remembrance of Miss Kitty Trewson's latest exploits is fresh the balance of opinion strongly supports the Captain's views. But, on some one asking whether he would prevent Miss Earle from enjoying her favourite sport, Crookton growls out that the exception proves the rule; that, he admits, is quite a different thing, for even he is not insensible to the charm of her presence.

During the season marked by Miss Kitty's first achievements Florence Earle and her mother were away—wintering in the south of France; but the elder lady's health revived, and the old Manor House on the Hill, at the bottom of which is the Cross Roads, our favourite meet, is happily again tenanted.

The idea of Florence Earle hunting struck Miss Kitty as extremely funny. "She does not look much like it," the volatile young lady observed on hearing that Miss Earle was expected. "I've seen her driving about to old women's cottages in a basket-carriage with a blind pony.

That seems more like what you call her 'form.' Can she ride?"

"Oh, yes!" Wynnerly answers, "she rides." And his face suggests that he could say a great deal more if he chose.

"She does not look as if she could say 'Bo' to a goose," the young lady remarked.

"Don't you give her the chance, Miss Kitty," is the somewhat vague repartee of a cavalier in attendance, who has just come from town, where he has presumably undergone a course of modern comedy.

All this is at the meet one December morning, and Miss Kitty's blue nose and purple cheeks show that the wind is keen. We are walking along the lane towards the covert that is to be drawn first, and some way ahead, in the midst of the throng, surely enough some one espies Miss Earle on a chestnut mare that has often distinguished herself with these hounds.

I despair of picturing Florence Earle in words. Her face would be rather beautiful than pretty but for the look of gentle kindness which is its chief characteristic, and a simplicity of expression altogether remote from the haughtiness which seems to be suggested by the word "beauty." A slight flush is on her cheeks, but the wintry wind does not appear to affect her, and there are no signs of that highly coloured rawness which is so decidedly perceptible in Miss Kitty. Looking at Florence Earle as she sits at once so firmly and so lightly on her mare, which seems so proud of her burden

—the phrase is conventional, but it is strictly true, and is there not reason to suppose that the creature is as proud as she looks?—an impartial observer who knew what horsemanship is (the phrase scarcely includes poor Kitty) would assuredly not say that the blind pony was “more like what you call her ‘form.’” Sir Henry Akerton rides by her side, and looks down from the back of his great brown horse with evident admiration at his companion, as she acknowledges with a kind smile the salutations and congratulations of those who know her, as they pass near. Anything more completely removed from the hunting lady (whom Mr. Boucicault so stupidly caricatured under the title of Lady Gay Spanker) cannot be imagined. It was perhaps, after all, excusable that Miss Kitty should have made her error, though when it comes to galloping all possibility of mistake at once vanishes.

The hounds find at once this morning, and all but the most arrant of gate hunters turn sharp round to the right, and cross the thin hedge and narrow ditch which separates them from the field where the pack is running. But the next obstacle is of a different sort. A thick, ugly-looking hedge—so ugly and blind that a stiff stile seems preferable—and over this Bill Heigh, the huntsman, gets fairly well; a well-known steeplechase jockey flies it after him; Scatterly hits it hard, and gets across with a clatter; Wynnerly, riding a young one, is turned completely over, an occurrence which does not seem to disconcert him in the least, for in a very few seconds the

young one is on his legs and Wynnerly is in the saddle. A hard-riding farmer does it neatly enough, but Miss Kitty, who has seen Wynnerly's cropper, checks her horse and turns to the left, where a long string of men are crossing a gap some two hundred yards away.

Here comes Florence Earle. The chestnut mare has reached at her bit a little at starting, but the girl's light hand has quieted her exuberance; and at a steady gallop, diminishing to a quiet canter, the pair approach. If Wynnerly's young one had gone like this they would have had a better chance. Instead of moderating its speed, the four-year-old had got out of hand, and, with the impetuosity of youth, gone at the timber racing pace, with, if not the inevitable, the most probable, consequences. Miss Earle's well-trained hunter knows her duty thoroughly, decreases the stroke of her canter, and, with an ease which seems nothing short of marvellous, springs lightly over the stiff bars. For the moment you wonder what there was in that little jump to turn Wynnerly over, to cause Scatterly to make all the fuss about it, and to stop nearly all the field. Here, however, comes Downing on a well-known steeplechaser, which refuses the first time, and only just manages it with obvious effort on a second attempt, and it evidently is not a simple matter to get over it. I confess to never having even thought of attempting it.

"What a beautiful horse!" Miss Kitty says, a little ungenerously.

"And what a beautiful rider!" some one answers;

to which Miss Trewson, feeling much smaller than she did when discussing Florence Earle in connection with the basket-carriage and the blind pony, says, "Yes," without any very great display of enthusiasm.

The entire absence of anything like effort is the peculiarity of Florence Earle's riding. Four times out of five she will finish among the first rank, and though the other horses (second horses some of them), and men too, often show strong symptoms of the pace, she is invariably as calm and self-possessed as when sitting quietly at the meet. A light weight may aid, no doubt; and, perhaps, another reason is that when one of her favourites exhibits signs of weariness she is always ready to stop; but this only partially explains the secret.

For the sport itself, the hunting of foxes, I am afraid it must be confessed, to the disgust of sportsmen, that Florence Earle cares nothing. When the hounds run into their fox she turns round and trots away; and that she would infinitely prefer a run without even the prospect of a kill I am certain. How does a girl like this defend her participation in such a sport? may be asked, and cannot be answered, for this is a sketch and not a moral essay.

I never knew the imperturbable Wynnerly speak enthusiastically on any subject but that of Florence Earle, and for her, words cannot describe his admiration. She rides well, and that, of course, wins one who is so devoted to horses and all belonging to them; but it is

her courage, generosity, and kindness which rouse him from his usual condition of *insouciance* to a state of the most fervent enthusiasm.

One day it appears, in the course of a run, Florence Earle and Wynnerly came to a fence almost side by side, and rose at it simultaneously. Wynnerly got over, and, glancing towards his companion, was alarmed to see her horse, a new one that had gone clumsily before, struggling to its legs, and its rider on the ground. He pulled up, caught the horse, and returned to the spot where Florence Earle had just made an ineffectual effort to rise.

"Thank you so much, Mr. Wynnerly. How kind of you to stop; but pray do not lose your place," she said as he helped her up.

"You are hurt, I am afraid, Miss Earle?" he inquired.

"Not at all, thank you," she replied, supporting herself against her horse. "My horse slipped on landing, but there's no harm done. I shall be so much grieved if I keep you—do pray ride on"

Just then her servant came up, and she continued her persuasions to Wynnerly not to lose his day on her account. He, however, persisting that she was hurt, presently found that she had broken her collar-bone and sprained her ankle.

"In pain as she was," Wynnerly told us, "she thought a great deal more about my losing a day's hunting than her own injuries. We helped her into the saddle, and walked slowly homeward. It was all through the blun-

dering of the beast she was riding that she got hurt; and what do you think she did? *Leaned over and patted the clumsy brute's neck.* Leave her? I'd rather have given up hunting for ever. Somehow or other it's very odd I always feel bad and good at the same time when I'm with her. She's the most splendid girl in the world!"



XV.

A HUNTSMAN.

THAT it is a rare and extraordinary occurrence to meet an entirely happy and contented man is a proposition which few will be inclined to dispute.

Which of us has his heart's desire, or, having it, is satisfied? the greatest of moralists has asked, and experience daily proves the truth of the reflection. If we only came into possession of that estate; if our horse only won his race and landed the gorgeous odds; if Matilda would only beatify us with her sweet consent!

The estate becomes yours, and you are bored to death by duties and annoyances arising from it: that endless lawsuit about a couple of worthless fields—you must go through with it, for you won't be swindled—that question of common right, the grossness or snob-bishness of all the neighbours within reach, are a few of the matters that daily cause you trouble and anxiety. The horse wins his race: you decide on one final plunge with the proceeds, and lose it all; while as for Matilda, well, there is no denying that Matilda has the *douce* of a temper.

Of a little child in the innocence of early days I wrote some years ago :—

“ You do not know how oft we find
The sourest fruit 'neath fairest rind,
How oft no longer lingers
The bloom of joys that please the eye
Than colours on the butterfly,
When touched by careless fingers.”

And even at an advanced age we are slow to learn the lesson.

It is therefore as pleasant as it is rare to discover a man who has won the prize he sought, and finds that it realises his expectations; and such an one is Bill Heigh, the Huntsman of the Meadowmere hounds.

Bill is a good deal older than myself, and the history of his early life comes to me at second hand; but I think it is quite a little idyl of the hunting field.

I have never heard the proverb applied to huntsmen, but am strongly of opinion that *venator nascitur non fit* is as true as the more familiar saying.

Bill Heigh was bred to be a gardener, and from his training and associations should have known more of hollyhocks than of hounds, less of foxes than of fuchsias, and have had a more comprehensive acquaintance with vegetables than with view holloas.

Bill's father was head-gardener to Sir Henry Akerton, our M.F.H., and in the ordinary course of events Bill would have succeeded in due time. A conscientious boy, he performed the tasks that were set him; but his

thoughts were in the kennels and the stables, and every spare moment he could find was spent in hovering around these most delightful precincts; while with every cur in the village he was on the most confidential terms. Of the puppies at walk he knew as much as Sir Henry or the Huntsman himself, and on hunting days, if he could contrive to make a holiday, it was spent in seeing as much of the sport as sturdy young legs, stout lungs, and an instinctive eye for a country, rendered possible.

His father was a little dismayed, though of course at the Hall hunting was the principal occupation, and absolutely to discourage a love for it would have been out of the question on the part of any one who served Sir Henry. Young Bill, moreover, was a good lad, a favourite with everybody; so that if his natural longings were not encouraged they were not checked.

The Hall is some five or six miles from the post town, and it was the custom to send the bag every night by a groom to post, as by this arrangement letters could be sent some hour or more later than they must have gone had they been carried by the itinerant postman. Bill had occasionally found means of getting a ride, and when he was about fourteen he had an excellent opportunity of acquiring the rudiments of horsemanship in the best possible way.

The groom whose duty it was to take the post-bag found metal very much more attractive in the opposite direction. Some four miles from the Hall was—and is

—a popular tavern much affected by youths from Brookley's training stables, from Scratton the dealer's, &c., and to ride off here and have a pint of ale and a chat about races to come was much better fun than carrying the letters to the post.

But the letters had to be taken of course, and Bill was always ready to take them. His only means of locomotion was a certain pony, Kicking Peggy by name, an unamiable beast that lived at the farm, and was accustomed to drag a mowing machine about the lawn, to run in a trap for odd jobs, and was not only quite unaccustomed, but entirely indisposed, to carry anybody on her back. A bridle was obtainable, but no saddle was to be had, and on Kicking Peggy's bare back—with intervals when he could not manage to retain that precarious position—Bill made an almost nightly journey to the town. Once or twice Peggy got away during the trip, after depositing her rider in a ditch or on the road, and had it not been for a convenient lift in a passing trap Sir Henry's letters would have been late for the post.

On Kicking Peggy, however, young Bill learnt very thoroughly the difficult art of sitting tight, and after a few expeditions, even if when the start took place some mischievously jocular friend touched the pony up with a whip and sent her kicking and plunging down the road, Bill kept his seat.

In time he acquired quite a reputation for his skill, and with many attempts was at times successful in

persuading Peggy to jump small fences. Young Brookley one day let Bill have the glorious treat of a gallop on the Downs, and for the first time he felt the supreme pleasure of being borne over the grass on the back of a thoroughbred horse. If his father would only have let him take service in the training stables, so that he might ride every day, his cup of happiness would have been full; but for a gardener he was at this time destined, and he knew that to suggest anything else would be not only futile but would give his father pain.

After the thoroughbred's stride Peggy seemed to go absurdly short, but Peggy was better than nothing, and it was owing to her that Bill came to enjoy the happiest day of his life—a gallop after the hounds on a good horse. Farmer Maizeley—young Maizeley in those days—was driving along the road when he came upon Bill trying to persuade Peggy to jump a low rail and ditch. It was in the afternoon, and the hounds having just crossed the road, Bill was suddenly fired with ambition to see some of the sport otherwise than on his legs. Peggy had done it before, but on this occasion was in one of her tantrums, stopped short at the rail, and amply justified her sponsors by kicking her hardest. Maizeley pulled up to see the fun, watched the unwilling steed refuse, and noted how patient but persistent, firm but gentle, the boy was.

“She’s not what you’d call a well-trained hunter, that pony, Bill?” Maizeley said, chaffingly: there is no story he so loves to tell as how he made Bill a huntsman.

"No, and she's particular troublesome to-day; but she'll do it presently," Bill answered, giving his mount just a tap with his ash stick to remind her that there were other means of persuasion available.

"Not that time, my boy—well saved, though!" he exclaimed, as the pony stopped short once more with a heave of the hind-quarters that almost shot Bill over her head; and then an idea struck the kind-hearted farmer.

"How would you like a ride with the hounds on a real 'un some day? I owe you a turn, Master Bill, for catching my horse the other day," asked Maizeley.

The idea was too splendid for belief, and the boy trotted up to the cart to look in Maizeley's face and see whether he really meant it. Evidently he did.

"Oh! I should so like it! Could you let me have one?" he answered.

"You come round on Tuesday at half-past ten, and we'll see," Maizeley replied, as pleased with the pleasure he was giving as the boy himself, whose "Thank you, Mr. Maizeley," was sincere and fervent. Then once more he turned Peggy to her jump, and this time she bounded over, gave a couple of kicks the other side, and galloped off over the field.

The eventful Tuesday arrived and Maizeley had not forgotten, as Bill, in his intense anxiety, had thought he possibly would do.

"You shall have the young chestnut mare, Bill; it'll be a holiday for her to carry you," his friend said, and

Bill was soon installed in the unwonted luxury of a saddle. He was, of course, perfectly well known in the field, and perhaps did not feel quite at ease as he splashed down a muddy lane, past his old foot-companions, a few village boys, an assistant earth-stopper, and a once well-known whip who had lost place after place through a drunken disposition, and now, attired in a weather-stained pink, earned occasional sixpences and shillings by opening gates, breaking down rails or removing binders for timid sportsmen, holding horses, and sometimes catching a loose one.

Sir Henry, riding by, nods to Maizeley, looks at Bill on his steed, asks the young farmer if that isn't his mare, and tells him to see that the boy doesn't hurt himself; for Bill's exploits are not known beyond the lower grades in the stable and about the home farm.

As sometimes happens, there was on this day a good deal of unproductive riding to and fro, and the best part of an hour had been thus passed before hounds got away on a hot scent. The chestnut mare could go, and after his experience on Kicking Peggy Bill found sitting on her a remarkably pleasant and simple matter. The ease with which the pair of them flew a high post and rail that set more than the best half of the field astonished Sir Henry.

"Just look at that boy on Maizeley's chestnut. He jumped the rails cleaner than anybody. It can't be the lad that's always running after the hounds?" a friend asked.

"It is. It's my gardener's son, though where he learnt to ride like that I can't say," Sir Henry answered.

But the Master was soon to be more astonished still.

The hounds checked. They had apparently overrun the scent. Marigold feathered down by the side of a ditch to the right, reluctant to leave, when the second whip drove her on to a holloa in the opposite direction, and presently from the covert where the pack had gone a hound spoke.

"Marigold was quite right, I'm sure," Bill said to his friend. "Countess has hit off the vixen that lies there."

Sir Henry overheard the remark.

"What do you say, my boy?" he asked; and Bill, blushing deeply, replied, as "Hark to Countess!" resounded from the covert,—

"I said, sir, that Marigold was right. It's the same fox that was lost last week, and I saw him come out of the ditch when you had gone to draw the Red Down Spinney. There's a vixen lying in that covert, and Countess very likely spoke to that;" and Bill touched his cap.

"How do you know it was Countess? Can you tell the hounds' voices? What was that?" Sir Henry asked.

"That's Sweetheart, I think, sir,—and that's Patience, I'm sure," Bill answered.

Sir Henry looked round silently at a group of his friends, and in a moment, drawing his horn, said,—

"Well, my boy, we'll see whether you are right. You've got Marigold on your side, apparently;" and making a cast a couple of hundred yards down the ditch indicated, out jumped the fox, sufficiently refreshed to go hard and fast for a rattling twenty minutes.

That glorious day decided Bill's career. After supper there came a summons from Sir Henry, who wanted to see Bill's father, and the old man came back after visiting the Hall, not exactly pleased nor precisely in a bad humour.

"The master wants to see you in the morning at ten o'clock, Bill. I shall never make a gardener of you I'm afraid!" he said, shaking his head with, nevertheless, a sort of pride in his son, who was a sharp, clever lad, Sir Henry had declared, though Heigh, senior, felt that the sharpness was wrongly directed.

It is hardly necessary to say that next morning Bill was punctual; indeed, he was about the stables and shrubberies a good three hours before the time appointed. What could his master want to say to him? and what did his father's speech about never making a gardener of him mean? As ten o'clock struck, Bill made his way to the servants' hall to find some one who would tell Sir Henry that he was there; and three minutes afterwards he found himself in the study, where, at a writing-table by the window, was seated the greatest man in all the world, according to Bill's ideas.

"How old are you, William Heigh?" Sir Henry began.

"Sixteen, sir," Bill answered.

"And you are going to be a gardener?" Sir Henry continued.

"Yes, sir," Bill replied, not quite so readily, for his eyes fell upon a rack in the corner where several hunting-crops were laid, and on the chimney-piece was a pair of spurs. The sight of these delightful implements, joined with a recollection of spades, rakes, and watering-pots drew forth an irrepressible sigh.

"I am afraid you'll make a very poor gardener if you pass all your time in running after my hounds."

"Yes, sir; but it's only now and then, and I'm so fond of them, sir, and——" Bill's apologies died away.

"Where did you learn to ride, Heigh?" Sir Henry asked.

"I've ridden Kicking Peggy a good deal, sir, she's a pony—and she kicks," Bill stammered.

"Doesn't she kick you off?"

"Yes, sir; but—I—get on again," Bill humbly replied, and a smile stole over Sir Henry's features.

"Well, William, your father seems to be afraid that you don't care much for his business, but he gives you a good character, and I have sent for you to ask whether you would like to come into my stables?"

Poor happy Bill paused before he could speak. Was this a blissful dream, and would he be awakened in a minute or two by paternal instructions to go and help Johnson hoe something, take some bulbs to Smith, and then weed the path in the west walk?

No! It was all true enough. Dazed as he was, that must, he surely felt, be Sir Henry telling him that if he is industrious and straightforward, civil to his companions, and kind to his horses, he will be sure to get on. Bill tries to express his gratitude and to promise to do his very best. An interval of delirium, in which tailors, boots, and breeches play a prominent part, supervenes. Monday morning sees Bill installed as second horseman, and Tuesday sees the beginning of his duties.

His early training and experience stood him in admirable stead. To a light weight and skill in the saddle he united, as before said, an instinctive knowledge of the fox's line, and as a second horseman Bill was little short of perfect. When a vacancy for a second whip occurred, however, Sir Henry felt bound to advance a good servant, and Bill—who, we may be sure, had meantime seen as much of his four-legged friends in the kennels as he possibly could—became officially connected with them. Bill had never before talked to hounds—that is to say, talked aloud—and a new qualification for success in his profession was now discovered—a rich and musical voice.

Further promotion fell to Bill some two seasons afterwards, and though it by no means follows that a good First Whip will make a good Huntsman, after passing five or six years as First Whip Bill attained the summit of his ambition, and was elevated to the rank he had always so eagerly desired.

While the Whip is the stern schoolmaster, the Huntsman is the friend and companion of his hounds; but Bill's temper was always kind and gentle, and he had never failed to retain the affection of his charges as well as to insure obedience.

To the abstruse question of breeding hounds Bill Heigh devotes himself with untiring diligence, and his excellent judgment in this matter is, of course, the foundation of his success as a Huntsman. Another secret is that he "does not worry his hounds when they are doing their business." His patience is inexhaustible.

"I let them think it out for themselves, and don't interfere until they ask me. If they give it up it's my turn to try," he says.

He invariably knows, too, what hounds are doing, being thoroughly acquainted with the dispositions and tempers of all his charges.

Often more than most people suppose a hound pretends to be very busy when he is doing nothing, but Bill is never deceived in these cases. He knows which to trust and when to trust him. In every pack there are hounds with different special qualifications—some patient and plodding, slow and sure; others brilliant and dashing; some that will gaily race away, trusting, as it were, to the rest, and only desiring to be well ahead; and others that want to make certain before all things that they are right, and that the fox is in front of them. Bill's ear and eye never seem to deceive him, and he can in fact trust to either.

When hounds throw up, Bill's recipe is to ask himself what he would have done if he had been a fox ; and the manner in which he appears to enter into the arguments and calculations of the cunning animal are nothing short of marvellous.

Beckford declares that a second-rate Huntsman and a first-rate First Whip are more likely to afford sport than if their measures of ability were reversed ; but I think an acquaintance with Bill Heigh would have altered his opinion.

On two occasions Bill and his hounds lost the same fox in the same place. The scent was hot as far as the high road, across which hounds dashed at right angles and threw up in the field beyond. Bill was puzzled, and the second time cast all about in every direction with the utmost patience and care before he would give up. A third time we got away, evidently with our old friend, and were taken over precisely the same line to the same spot. But Bill had kept his attention fixed on Sweetheart, knowing that he could trust her implicitly ; and she would acknowledge it no farther than the side of the road to which we came first. This was just by a pound, walled in except at its opening, facing the high road, where was the railed entrance. To this corner, between the tree and the wall, Sweetheart returned twice.

"He's gone along the top of the wall, sir," Bill exclaimed.

"I don't fancy so, really," Sir Henry answered,

shaking his head. "He could not have jumped up, if he could have travelled along that thin rail."

"Sweetheart says so, sir," Bill replied. "He's run up that tree, jumped on to the branch, and then on to the wall."

The thing seemed impossible, for, though the fox might have got on the branch, it appeared quite out of the question that he could have jumped a good eight feet on to the wall in such a way that the impetus would not have carried him over on the other side; and the rail he must have crossed, if Bill were right, was a piece of timber with the top at an acute angle.

Sweetheart, however, stuck to her post at the foot of the tree, running to and fro between that and the corner of the wall, and a few of her friends returned to see what she had to say. Bill lifted her up, and she ran along the top speaking to it vociferously, but stopped at the rail as if wondering how to get across. Bill solved the difficulty by lifting her over, and on the other side she went on till, some few yards beyond on a branch of an ivy-covered oak-tree, the fox was seen peering down.

To understand how utterly improbable Bill's idea seemed to be, the nature of the place and the position of the high wall and tree must be realised, and it vastly astonished all who were up at the time.

I have no story to tell about Bill Heigh on one point concerning which there are many current anecdotes of huntsmen. I do not know that he ever directed an insolent witticism at any gentlemen out with his

master's hounds. There are no tales of "what Bill Heigh said to that fellow on the brown mare," or "how he shut up young Blank."

Now and again he has to make a request to some troublesome members of the Hunt, or more likely to some stranger from town; but though perhaps his equable temper may be tried at times, he is always respectful and polite.

He married pretty Polly Maizeley, the younger sister of his early friend, and there is a sturdy little Bill, junior, some four years old, who toddles about after his sire, and when the sire is away from home may generally be found in intimate companionship with some wise old hound or frolicsome puppy by the fireside in winter, and on the doorstep of Bill's neat little cottage in warm weather.

In time he will doubtless succeed his father: such at least is Bill Heigh's aspiration. It is the general opinion that little Bill is a genuine chip of the old block; and so there is every reason to hope that for many years to come the Meadowmere Hounds will be provided with a Huntsman.

XVI.

THE FIRST MEET OF THE S—— HOUNDS.

"SEE you on Thursday, sir?" has for the last fortnight been the usual greeting of friendly farmers as they passed one on the road, and, as the updrawing of my blind awakens me, I soon recollect that the eventful Thursday has arrived, and that the hounds are to meet for the first time this season. "It is our opening day," as the band of merry outlaws sing in *Guy Mannering*; and already, as I dress, occasional glimpses of pink coats, with bobbing backs of darker hue, are visible from my window through the trees which partially hide the road. These are the early birds from a distance, bound for breakfast at the Manor House, and are anxious, those of them who are limited in the matter of horse-flesh, to give their animals a rest before beginning the business of the day; feeling sure on their own accounts that at the hospitable table of the popular master the interval can be passed pleasantly enough.

How lovingly one's breeches seem to cling around one's knees, without crease or wrinkle; and how firmly braced up one feels in the double-seamed black coat! In short, how extremely satisfactory is the world from

every possible point of view when one's favourite sport again comes into season, and there is a particularly excellent prospect of the first of many good runs. Breakfast is dispatched with one eye on the plate and the other on the drive in front of the house, to note the earliest appearance of the little iron-grey colt, that seemed at the end of last season to take so kindly to his business, and will, it is the unanimous opinion of his many friends and acquaintances, distinguish himself greatly now that he has come to maturity, and now that judicious schooling has taught him the shortest and easiest way over a fence, and has succeeded in convincing him that he is not a competitor in a high-jumping contest, as he appeared at first to believe was the case.

Heralded by the jingling of his curb, here he comes, and my pink-coated companion joins with me in admiration of the well-shaped frame, sturdy, yet not heavy, with those muscular second thighs, upon which so much depends towards the close of a hard day; and powerful shoulders, which do not belie their apparent capacity for getting through the dirt. I think it is "Scrutator"—it can hardly be Major Whyte-Melville, for his horses were invariably of a more fashionable stamp—who vows that one of the best horses he ever rode had crooked fore-legs and no shoulders, but muscular hind-quarters, with tremendous ribs and loins; so that in fact his fore-quarters acted simply as pioneers. It may be that the propelling power of a

horse lies behind the shoulders, but none the less the animal in question was an exception, and without good shoulders a horse can hardly make a good hunter.

By the time we reach the high road the stream of horsemen is thickening, and under the oaks in the Manor park a little throng of farmers has already assembled, chatting gaily and doing justice to the contents of well-filled trays thoughtfully provided for those who do not accept the general invitation to breakfast. Neatly attired grooms are leading their charges to and fro, and on the steps of the house the master stands, amidst a little booted and spurred group who have made way for hungry late-comers, pressing all and sundry to enter and join the party at the table, who, unless a glance through the window conveys a singularly incorrect impression, are having a merry time of it.

The old butler knows our weakness, and confidently whispering that he has "got some of that sherry up" forthwith proceeds to fetch a sensible-sized bumper for myself and friend, together with a third for the Major, one of the pillars of this hunt, who has a keen appreciation of that most excellent vintage.

Fresh additions to the company are constantly arriving. Here comes young Laceby's drag, somewhat feebly handled by that young gentleman himself, who is ardently wishing that he dared give his off leader what that too excitable animal richly deserves; only that he is painfully uncertain as to what might happen

in the course of the next two minutes. The noble steed has never taken quite kindly to harness, and knows very well what all this gathering under the trees is about; but beyond an entirely ineffectual "Who-a! will you!"—which he clearly won't till some one gets down and holds his head—Laceyby does not venture to go.

Here is the doctor, who, of course, is greeted with the set jokes as to the object of his arrival which are commonly fired off when his fraternity appear in the hunting field; and here, in the neatest of all possible pony phaetons, is the Lady Bountiful of our district, driven by her pretty daughter, who has a smile and a pleasant word for all who ride up to shake the kindest and prettiest little hand in all the south country.

Away to the right there is evidently something up.

It is the pack approaching; and soon, with waving sterns and upturned faces, seventeen couples of as well-shaped hounds as are to be found in England, that is to say in the world—so, at least, every member of our Hunt will strenuously maintain, and readily answer any criticism which the envious may adduce—are gathered round their master's horse.

We who implicitly believe in our master, especially when aided by the advice of the Major and a few chosen friends, together with such servants as those at our kennels, knowing how many critical examination days there have been on the flags and at walk, to say nothing of a course of cub-hunting, have every confi-

dence that the apprentices in the new-entry will sustain the reputation of their seniors.

That yelp came from poor Trinket, who cannot be persuaded of the folly of lingering behind, and, to judge from her solemn face, seriously pondering over private family affairs when she ought to be attending to her public duties. Trinket is an excellent hound when once she sets herself to her task, but her meditative disposition is apt to get her into trouble. Another crack of the whip reminds a young hound that the present is not a favourable moment for either quarrelling or larking with his companions, and one or two other little matters having been adjusted the move takes place.

A wave of the huntsman's arm sends the obedient pack into the covert which adjoins the park; the more excitable horses curvet and shake their heads, eager to be off, while the more sedate and sensible reserve their energies, listening with pricked ears for the music they know and love so well; while the hounds spread themselves and draw eagerly for their prey. Now and then comes a whimper, but it dies away; and as we skirt the covert-side nothing more is heard save now and again the voice of the huntsman or of a whip encouraging or rating his hounds.

On we go, the little grèy horse playing with his bit, but always acknowledging a restraining touch when excitement half induces him to forget himself. The park gates are reached and the leaders turn into a ride beyond, along which we follow. Now and then a hound

crosses the path and again plunges into the underwood, but still there is no sign of a fox, and when we emerge and regain the open, most of the pack are surrounding the huntsman and looking inquiringly up for further orders. The sun shines with rather more brightness than is exactly welcome under the circumstances, though still we hope for the best, and console ourselves with the reflection that as there is no fox here there is all the more probability that we shall find one elsewhere—a comforting thought which will always keep up the spirits of any one who cannot find the fox, the fur, or the feathers that he is seeking. Across the field, however, is a covert which has rarely been drawn blank, and for this we make, to the great delight of the horses, who are for a couple of minutes indulged in a modified edition of the gallop for which they have been longing.

A too adventurous youth on a mealy chestnut rides quite unnecessarily at some posts and rails, over which he is promptly deposited on his back; and Laceby and his horse thereupon fall out on the question of whether or not they could do it better if they tried, the horse being anxious to give proof that it is just the sort of jump he is especially good at, while Laceby is more than willing to take his ability for granted and postpone timber jumping *sine die*. Leaving this ambitious youth, who is much more at home in the City than in the saddle, to soothe his animal with a canter round the field—a mode of progression which has a good deal

more of the "buck" about it than the rider likes—we thread our way down a brambly slope, over a broken hedge into a terribly sloshy ride, with mud up to the horses' fetlocks, until coming to firmer ground we pause to see what can be brought forth here. Yes! half a dozen hounds simultaneously give tongue, and we press forward to the field beyond us, while down a side path trots the huntsman with his hounds streaming to him.

"Keep back, gentlemen, please!" he cries, more from force of habit than from necessity, for the couple of dozen of us who are at this point press back into the fence, lest by any chance we should head the fox. "Together on! together on!" cries our friend, and there—yes!—surely that is the fox stealing down the hedge-row! Now is the time to press on hats, feel the stirrups, and carefully run one's fingers through the reins. The welcome cry of the hounds rings out, and the little iron-grey rears up in his anxiety to be off. With keen ears we listen for the "Forrard!" "Forrard!" "Gone away!" but to the general distress the voices of the hounds gradually die out, and we are left lamenting.

A couple of cock pheasants fly over our heads as if in mockery of their enemies' dismay, the rest of the field ride up, to find that we have not got the start of them as they evidently feared, and, with rather blank faces, master and huntsman take council together as to the next move. "The sun's against us," the Major admits, as we canter off once again, but still it can hardly be sufficiently hot to dry scent up entirely, and the day is

still young, though so far near upon two hours have passed without results.

The hounds dash into covert again, not one of our well-bred beauties taking the least notice of a frightened hare which runs within half a dozen yards of the foremost, and again we skirt the fence, listening for the desired chorus.

Flasks and sandwich-cases are now produced, and cigars are rather the rule than the exception. Not without misgiving we look to our oracle, the Major; for if his cigar-case comes out, and one of his precious Celestiales is lighted, we understand that in the opinion of a very competent judge there will be nothing to prevent him from enjoying it to the end.

"It's very tiresome!" pouts an impatient young lady, as we all continue with ears astretch; but even to oblige a good-looking young girl a fox will not always come out and afford a run.

"How beautiful the beech-woods are at this time of year," I remark, pointing down the vale over one of the most picturesque landscapes our country possesses; but she is not to be consoled by beech-trees, though their leaves may exhibit all the colours of the rainbow in perfect harmony.

"Yes, I know," this unæsthetic young person rejoins; "but I can see lots of beech-trees at home, and I think it's very disappointing—— what's that?" she breaks off suddenly, and it is soon evident that "that" is what we have been waiting for.

Marigold has hit off a hot scent, the burst of music from the pack leaves little doubt about it, and the first whip's "Gone away!" with that wild and jubilant scream which is not to be put down on paper, leaves none at all. There he goes, out of the ditch, through the fence, and up the slight ascent on the other side, and as the last hounds leap out of the covert we merrily start across the grass. With what a firm and blithesome stride the little iron-grey lifts himself over the grass, and how cleverly he gathers himself up, after just a hint from the reins, for the fence before us—a set of lowish rails with a hedge just rising above them.

Unnecessary jumping is, of course, at all times to be condemned and avoided, and there is an open gate twenty yards to the left; but it would be too cruel to balk the eager horse's desire, and without perceptible effort he bounds over, landing in a wet plough, through which he would go at racing pace were he not steadied. The first fence has stopped no one, and, indeed, hardly could have done so, seeing that there was the open gate for choice. In a compact body the hunt crosses the plough, and in the pack there is not a straggler. A thin fence into the meadow beyond hardly causes the horses to rise, and we can form a shrewd notion of the sensations experienced by the rhymer who sang with such enthusiastic delight of the joys of

"A quick thirty minutes from Banksborough Gorse."

Even so far, however, some of the field have disappeared, notably the two light weights on weedy

thoroughbreds, who are wasting their time in the utterly hopeless endeavour of obtaining from the Master a hunter's qualification for horses which have not been legitimately hunted. Their crocks might just as well have been in the stable for all the good they have done to-day in this direction, and if other Masters were equally firm something which bears a very close resemblance to an impudent swindle might be prevented.

But familiar faces are here in a little knot as we speed over a big clover field, and the horseman ahead of us all, and in very dangerous proximity to the hounds, is Laceby; though it is only fair to him to admit that circumstances over which he has no control—a pulling horse and a want of knowledge how to ride him—have him in complete subjection.

The Master, on a splendid bay with black points, holds his own with the utmost ease; the impatient young lady is in the seventh heaven of delight as the footstrokes of her shapely little chestnut mare thud on the turf; of course the Major is in his usual position, for though his old hunter has small pretensions to breeding or beauty, and does not look particularly like jumping or galloping, it must be indeed a hard day when it does not keep its place in the van, or at any rate turn up, sometimes from unsuspected quarters, at critical moments.

But are we really in for a run, or is disappointment to be still our lot?

A sudden swerve to the right heads us straight for a well-known covert, wherein more than once before a run has come to a sudden and inglorious conclusion; and with much anxiety, together with not a little discontent, we canter along the furrows or close to the hedge in the mangold field through which hounds are running. Hounds disappear, and apprehensively we canter onward, but are mightily relieved when with a loud burst, as though they had all viewed him at the same second, they speed on again across a pasture bordered by the Downs, and, topping or scrambling through the hedge, stream up the steep hill-side.

Easing our horses all we can up the ascent, we follow, and, with much care and encouragement from voice and hand, we descend. The fox turns off diagonally, and now we know pretty well the earths for which he is heading.

The bottom of the hill is happily reached, though the field now presents a long tail, and those who have not husbanded their resources up the ascent and over the plough discover, especially if they have been larking before the find, and galloping too recklessly to and fro, that they will have to do all they know, and in many cases more than that, to keep their places. Laceby's horse has distressed itself—to say nothing of having very seriously distressed him—and, swerving at a fence just by a gate, topples clumsily over the latter, upon which safe eminence the rider presently ensconces himself, after having carefully examined his arms and

legs, and watches his steed cantering off on its own account.

I am gradually becoming conscious that there is an awkward brook in front, and doubts as to the little iron-grey's probable proceedings (he never having been ridden at a stream) begin to assert themselves. In a high flight of rails, guided by the Major, I find a broken place, and then, over more grass—there is no doubt about it—we are coming to a brook, and a good-sized one moreover.

The gallant colt pricks his ears, but there is no doubt that he means to have it, and indeed he clears it with a bound which lands his hind-legs a good yard the other side. More than one bath takes place here, and at a nasty blind fence with a ditch on the landing side, over which the iron-grey gets with rather a bad stumble, more of the followers are stopped. The plough is cruelly wet and heavy, and the rather flashy horse my friend is riding (this morning at breakfast I did certainly say it looked like going; but then, what can you say under such circumstances?) is done, and labours on with heaving flanks and panting nostrils. Neither is the iron-grey going by any means so freely as he was five minutes ago, so that in the interests of safety and self-preservation I am compelled reluctantly to wake him up at the next fence.

Our Master still goes at ease, as do the huntsman and whips on their seasoned hunters; the Major keeps his place a little in the rear; some half-dozen pink coats,

as many black ones, a boy on a pony, a horse-dealer on a raking chestnut, together with a couple of ladies, constitute the first flight.

But surely something is wrong in front? The hounds throw up their heads, and slacken speed. The scent has failed. Have they overrun it? Yes! With a wild halloo a pink coat at the head of a long line of stragglers points with his hunting crop to the hedge-row along which the draggled fox is stealing. Again he is viewed away and plunges into the dry ditch, but when the hounds reach the spot where he disappeared they are again at fault. Nor do subsequent efforts bring his whereabouts to light. There must have been some unsuspected earth into which he crept, warmly congratulating himself upon a singularly narrow escape. It is past four o'clock, and we are reluctantly compelled to admit that to-day the fox has had the best of us.

So ends the first meet of the S—— hounds—without a kill, truly, but with the consciousness that every man, hound, and horse has done his work in a way which can only be accepted as an earnest of better luck to come. That other packs may throughout the season be as fortunate as ours, and that ours may be as fortunate as the best, is a concluding wish to which no one will take exception.

XVII.

“SEASONABLE WEATHER.”

THERE is a silent eloquence about the proceedings of one's servant on a frosty morning peculiarly abominable in its plainness. He thinks you are not awake, perhaps ; but you are, and can tell by the cautious manner in which he moves about the room, fearful of disturbing you, that things meteorological are just about as bad as they can be. In his hand he bears your boots and breeches ; but these emblems of the chase he does not put by your bedside ready for use. On the contrary, he silently opens a drawer, takes out a pair of trousers, and then you know, if you had not known before, which way the wind blows—north-east, in all probability.

“Frost, eh ?” you ask, having noted these preparations with dismay.

“Yes, sir. Freezing hard. Came on to snow in the night, and dreadful slippery, sir, this morning,” he answers.

In desperation you remark, interrogatively, “No hunting, I suppose ?”

“Oh, dear, no ! Looks as if frost was setting in, sir.”

So it apparently is. The landscape is white, and that

utterly offensive condition of affairs sometimes known as "seasonable weather" has come about with a vengeance. You dress leisurely, and saunter down to breakfast, where your companions are trying hard to look agreeable, and that donkey Borders, an amateur actor of distressing pertinacity, is in high feather; which does not make you love Borders. Neither can you cordially join in Miss Pensyller's enthusiastic admiration for the scene from the windows, the bare twigs and branches of the trees exquisitely—the phrase is hers, and, in this connection, is what Polonius calls "a vile phrase"—traced out with the snow. The little birds are having a festive time over an unexpected breakfast thoughtfully provided by our hostess, when, poor little creatures, they had despaired of that meal, and were more than doubtful about luncheon. But what are we to do? Read last night's papers which have just come by post? As always happens under such circumstances they are singularly uninteresting.

Round to the stables we go for a smoke, but this again is an annoying performance, for it is a proposition which I fancy few will dispute, that horses never look so fit and so much like going as on a "seasonable" morning. Your favourite, that you intended to ride to-day—confound this frost!—gazes round at you as much as to say, "It's rather poor sort of fun standing here. Why is no one getting me ready, and how about those hounds?" You cannot stand this, and stroll back to the house, where you find Borders endeavouring to organize a dramatic

entertainment. You are just the man he wants, and are given to understand that he has cast you for a part in a farce, your duty in which will consist in decking yourself in some absurd costume, coming in, and letting him empty a bag of flour on your head, or smudge your face with lamp-black. "Awfully good situation; the people will yell with laughter!" he tells you, but you don't see it, and are set down as a surly creature, devoid of all notion of true humour.

Suppose the frost continues through the whole winter! Suppose there were to be no hunting for weeks, no chance of proving the excellence of a carefully chosen stud, seeing whether the little bay mare was as good as she looked, and how much discount must be allowed from the eulogistic assertions of her late owner? These are the thoughts which afflict us as we take up the paper again to read the weather prophecies, and make angry assaults on the barometer, which resents the insult by behaving worse than ever.

But we know that there is a good time coming, though we may not always be able to fix the precise date. The English climate is as variable as Virgil tells us lovely woman is, and if sometimes your hopes are dashed, at other times your evil anticipations are agreeably disappointed. When you expect to find by your bed-side those stay-at-home garments to which reference has been made above, lo and behold! in comes your man, with a smile on his face, and your breeches on his arm. He proclaims it to be a fine

morning, and so it is. The snow has disappeared; the country is clear; deep it may be, heavy going even on the grass, worse in the plough, and knee-deep in the rides through tangled coverts; but what does that matter? Stout limbs, good wind, and eager hearts are ready to overcome all drawbacks.

Borders is in despair, and tries to make his company solemnly promise and vow to be home to rehearsal at four o'clock; an attempt in which Borders miserably fails. If Miss Pensyller would ask you to admire this landscape you would willingly cap all her terms of praise; but she says it is nasty dirty weather, and determines to stay at home. Here come the horses, and when Muffington, who has been talking very "big" about his prowess, perceives the steed he is to ride rarely standing on more than two legs at the same time, he looks very much as if he would like to stay at home and help Borders, or flirt with the æsthetic Miss Pensyller.

Philosophers tell us that anticipation is more satisfactory than realisation, and certainly the ride to the meet is not the least agreeable feature of a day's hunting. The cheery nod of acquaintances whom one overtakes on the road, or meets as they come from by-ways and out of lodge gates, shows their delight at having at length got the better of the late vile—that is to say, of course, "seasonable"—weather.

Recent immunity from danger has made Master Reynard incautious, and he is pleasantly trotting along through the under-growth, when Vixen comes upon a

spot he has just quitted, and announces her discovery in the most unmistakable manner. Her companions readily admit the justice of the information, and the fox, hearing their references to his private affairs, does not wait to resent the intrusion. Off he goes across the open, and the hounds, running almost to view, eagerly bound through the fence, followed by the field in general, barring two or three, who go carelessly and land on their heads or backs as the case may be, not calculating on a ditch the other side of the jump; and Muffington sincerely regrets the want of moral courage which led him out hunting instead of permitting him to stay at home comfortably and safely with Borders.

Men who want to live to the end will do well to take a pull at their horses; for though there is sound wisdom in poor Major Whyte-Melville's theory that a horse in fighting for his head takes as much out of himself as if allowed to go with tolerable freedom, the steeds this morning are too much inclined to gallop. Which way? Towards those disagreeably dense woods to the left, where a fox with decent topographical knowledge would have so excellent a chance of finding an open earth, or away, bearing slightly to the right, across a line of splendid country that we know so well? A moment of anxious doubt decides it, and the hounds make a decided bend in the hoped-for direction. Over the rails is an easy task, for a heavy man on a huge horse placidly goes at and crashes through the top one;

but many saddles are emptied and boots filled in the deep and disagreeable brook beyond, having crossed which in safety we may fearlessly join in the congratulation :—

We're steadily sailing away to the fore ; I
Think we've every prospect of seeing the run,
For, *primo aspirat fortuna labori*,
A thing is half finished when neatly begun.

It has been said that five-and-twenty minutes is quite long enough for a run, and many who have been hard at it for that period have by this time thoroughly adopted the opinion ; but still hounds go on, with no sign of stopping, though the field is very considerably thinned, as need hardly be said. By a lucky chance Scatterly has got his second horse, a mean and unfair advantage, for which, at the moment, we cordially hate him ; and had he been turned over without doing himself much damage about this period of the run, I fear some of us would not have lamented the downfall of as good a fellow as ever sat in saddle ; for, much as you may like a man, you like him less than usual when he is cutting you down, and “bellows to mend” is the general situation.

But suddenly a ringing holloa proclaims that they have seen him, and in the next field the stout fox is rolled over. One lady, two men, the master, and huntsman alone are up, and from the heaving flanks of the horse which has so gallantly carried the latter, it is clear he could not have held on much longer. The

Whip just stumbles into the field at the critical moment, the effort of scrambling through the last fence finishing off his horse; and a few others struggle up in turn to receive the credit of having gone well through a fast forty minutes.



XVIII.

A SCIENTIFIC SPORTSMAN.

THE air of sublime superiority with which Tewters was accustomed to make a donkey of himself on frequent occasions amply justifies his inclusion in these sketches ; for though it is to be hoped that very few men are 'quite so silly as he was, and probably is, if one had the misfortune to know where to find him at the present moment, there are a great many young gentlemen who believe that they know all about it, when, as a matter of fact, their belief is in a precisely inverse ratio to the truth.

There was (*crede* Tewters) nothing that he could not do : and he did nothing. He came to Fallowfield to stay with an aged female relative, and attracted the attention of the residents by strutting about the town with an air of tolerant but slightly contemptuous criticism, as he gazed about him ; and when calling one afternoon on Downing, we found our then unknown friend in the billiard-room, dilating learnedly on angles of incidence and reflection, and explaining how the game really ought to be played. We soon discovered that explaining was his strong point. He had a decided opinion on everything, and was always ready, if not to

show, at any rate to explain, how one ought to perform any sort of operation whatsoever.

On one of the earliest days of the hunting season Tewters, without having stated his intention to any one—we did not, in fact, see very much of him—rode up on a steady-looking old hunter, and joined in the conversation. We were discussing the always interesting subject of getting across country, and Tewters proceeded to enlighten us.

“A great deal too much nonsense is talked about men riding straight,” he observes. “Fencing is so simple, that there is no reason why any man with common sense and the use of his limbs should not ride.”

“Yet,” I venture to suggest, “men do at times come to grief.”

“They do,” he admits; “but only because they do not follow the simplest of rules. A seat is kept either by balance or by grip; and a combination of the two methods affords absolute security. Men come into the field knowing nothing of the sport, and then wonder that they get into trouble.”

“I suppose you’ve hunted a good deal?” Fluterton asks.

“I know something of it. We had better get into the covert, I think,” he rejoins, and rides forward. Heigh has just begun to draw, and we are waiting outside listening for the first indication of something up. “Where is he going to, that fellow?” some one asks, as Tewters trots along the fence till he finds a gate, and

rides in just about the spot where the foremost hounds are working.

In a moment or two he emerges, however. Heigh has politely begged him to keep outside, and he does so; but instead of returning back to us, he trots along by the side of the hedge till he is lost to sight.

Suddenly a yell is heard in his direction. We set off, and find him standing up in his stirrups, and uttering wild shrieks.

"I saw him! I saw him come out of there!" he cries excitedly, repeating his yell.

"And you sent him in again?" Wynnerly asks, with ironical amazement, for Tewters seems to be delighted with his exploit.

"Yes; he went in just there!" and he triumphantly points out the spot.

"Well, perhaps on the whole it would have been better if you had stayed quietly with us," Downing sarcastically remarks; but Tewters does not see it. We have been kept in by frost for several days and are pining for a gallop, and to be regarded contemptuously by the man who has just headed the fox is exasperating in no small degree. But Tewters is still superior.

"I have always found that men are of more use in the covert than gossiping about the fences. The huntsman here seems to conduct his business differently, for he requested me to stay outside; and when I saw the fox of course I halloed," Tewters answers.

"Following on inside the covert is different from getting right before the hounds, and viewing the fox away is not quite the same as heading him back," Downing observes, with disgust.

"He's been getting up his hunting out of a book and has got hold of the wrong end of the stick," Flutterton suggests as Tewters rides on, evidently pitying our ignorance of the elements of sport. "I wonder whether he can ride?"

The doubt was soon to be solved. From the other side of the strip of covert the Whip viewed the fox away, and the hounds made straight for a fair hunting fence, hedge and ditch. Tewters was a little in front of us, and to give him his due he had the courage of his convictions. He went straight at the jump, his horse rose, he rose still higher, left the saddle, was jerked violently into the air, and turning almost a complete somersault landed on his back; while the horse, which had jumped smoothly and without superfluous effort, galloped on ahead. The combination of grip and balance had, for some unexplained cause, proved unsuccessful.

Tewters was not in the least hurt, but just a little discomfited—more shaken, however, as regarded himself than his convictions. His horse was caught and brought back to him, and he climbed into the saddle. For some time he kept to gates with much discretion, but on arriving near a tolerably wide brook proceeded to put his theory again into practice, and went for it;

the old horse stopped suddenly on the brink, shot Tewters clean over his head into the water, and paused with legs and neck outstretched as if to watch how his "master" was going to get out again.

This ended his hunting for the first day, and it was some time before he reappeared, having meantime undergone, as we afterwards learned, a severe course of hurdles and bars in a riding school, and having tumbled about over them with desperate perseverance before he could be brought to understand that the combination of balance and grip, though excellent in theory, requires practice to give it due effect.

A man cannot do himself any physical injury by talking nonsense, however, so Tewters takes advantage of the circumstance and indulges himself freely. Before his first appearance he had rarely been on a horse, and never away from the high road. He soon found out how to take care of himself, and he forgot the exciting events of his first day—forgot them so entirely that he never even explained how it was that he bumped so awkwardly over the hedge and finished in the water. His air of superiority was quickly resumed, and in a very short time he was as ready with a criticism on what was being done, and an explanation of what people should do, as though his career had been long and glorious.

He was a student of sporting literature, and could readily explain to you how to hold your gun, so that you could not miss a shot, or how to do anything else; though on the matter of jumping fences he was less

eloquent than on most things. The sources of his inspiration were discovered, and when he explained how the hounds ought to be hunted, under difficult circumstances, or gave opinions on other abstruse points, some of the men who had grown tired of hearing Tewters talk nonsense took to replying, "Yes, I know—Beckford says so, but it does not apply here;" "'Scrutator' showed how it might be effective in certain cases of which this is not one;" "A man who clearly knew nothing about it said so in the paper last week;" and make similar endeavours to convince him that his opinions are not regarded as original inspirations, or the result of acute personal experience.

Tewters smiled with the accustomed air of superior wisdom for some time, but at length appears to have concluded that we were not worthy to receive the pearls of his instruction—put more bluntly, though this way of putting it would never have occurred to him, he felt that we had discovered how great a humbug he was—and, if he has not abandoned hunting altogether, he is doubtless laying down the law for the officials and followers of some other pack of hounds.

XIX.

HUNTINGCROP HALL:

A TALE OF TRIUMPHANT ADVENTURE.

“REPUTATION! Reputation! oh, I have lost my reputation!” It was, I believe, one Michael Cassio, a Florentine, who originally made the remark; and I can only say I sincerely wish I were in Michael Cassio’s position, and could lose mine. It may be a “bubble,” this same reputation; indeed, we have high authority for so terming it; but “bubble” rhymes with “trouble,” and that is the condition to which such a reputation as mine is apt to bring you; for it supposes me to be a regular Nimrod, whereas I know about as much of the science of the chase as my suppositious prototype probably knew of ballooning; it sets me down as being “at home in the saddle,” whereas it is there that I am, if I may be allowed the expression, utterly at sea.

When, last November, I was seated before a blazing fire in Major Huntingcrop’s town house, and his too charming daughter, Laura, expressed her enthusiastic admiration for hunting and everything connected with it—mildly at the same time hinting her contempt for

those who were unskilled in the accomplishment—could I possibly admit that I was among the despised class? Was it not rather a favourable opportunity for showing our community of sentiment by vowing that the sport was the delight of my life, and firing off a few sentences laden with such sporting phraseology as I had happened to pick up in the course of desultory reading?

Laura listened with evident admiration. I waxed eloquent. My arm-chair would not take the bit between its teeth and run away; no hounds were in the neighbourhood to test my prowess; and I am grieved to admit that for an exciting ten minutes the “father of— stories” (what a family he must have!) had it all his own way with me.

“*Atra cura sedit post equitem* indeed!” I concluded. “You may depend upon it, Miss Huntingcrop, that man was mounted on a screw! Black Care would never dare to intrude his unwelcome presence on a galloper. Besides, why didn’t the fellow put his horse at a hurdle? Probably Black Care wouldn’t have been able to sit a fence. But I quite agree with you that it is the *duty* of a gentleman to hunt; and I only wish that the performance of some of my other duties gave me half as much pleasure!”

Where I should have ended it is impossible to say; but here our *tête-à-tête* was interrupted by the advent of the Major, who heard the tag end of my panegyric with manifest delight.

“Huntingcrop is the place for you, Mr. Smoothley,”

said he, with enthusiasm, "and I shall be more than pleased to see you there. I think, too, we shall be able to show you some of your favourite sport this season. We meet four days a week, and you may reckon on at least one day with the Grassmere. It is always a sincere pleasure to me to find a young fellow whose heart is in it."

As regards my heart, it was in my boots at the prospect; and, despite the great temptation of Laura's presence, I paused, carefully to consider the *pros* and *cons* before accepting.

How pleasant to see her fresh face every morning at the breakfast-table! How unpleasant to see a horse, most likely painfully fresh also, waiting to bear me on a fearsome journey as soon as the meal was concluded! How delightful to feel the soft pressure of her fingers as she gave me morning greeting! How awful to feel my own fingers numbed and stiff with tugging at the bridle of a wild, tearing, unmanageable steed! How enjoyable to——

"Are you engaged for Christmas, Mr. Smoothley?" Laura inquired, and that query settled me. It might freeze; I could sprain my ankle, or knock up an excuse of some sort. Yes, I would go; and might good luck go with me.

For the next few days I unceasingly studied the works of Major Whyte-Melville, and others who have most to say on what they term sport, and endeavoured to get up a little enthusiasm. I did get up a little—*very* little;

but when the desired quality had made its appearance, attracted by my authors' wizard-like power, it was of an extremely spurious character, and entirely evaporated when I had reached the little railway-station nearest to the Hall. A particularly neat groom, whom I recognised as having been in town with the Huntingcrops, was awaiting me in a dog-cart, and the conveyance was just starting when we met a string of horses, hooded and sheeted, passing along the road: in training, if I might be permitted to judge from their actions, for the wildest scenes in "Mazeppa," "Dick Turpin," or some other exciting equestrian drama. I did not want the man to tell me that they were his master's; I knew it at once; and the answers he made to my questions as to their usual demeanour in the field plunged me into an abyss of despair.

The hearty greeting of the Major, the more subdued but equally inspiring welcome of his daughter, and the contagious cheerfulness of a house full of pleasant people, in some measure restored me; but it was not until the soothing influence of dinner had taken possession of my bosom, and a whisper had run through the establishment that it was beginning to freeze, that I thoroughly recovered my equanimity, and was able to retire to rest with some small hope that my bed next night would not be one of pain and suffering.

Alas, for my anticipations! I was awakened from slumber by a knock at the door, and the man entered my room with a can of hot water in one hand and a pair

of tops in the other; whilst over his arm were slung my—in point of fact, my breeches; a costume which I had never worn except on the day it came home, when I spent the greater portion of the evening sportingly arrayed astride of a chair, to see how it all felt.

“Breakfast at nine, sir. Hounds meet at Blackbrook at half-past ten; and it’s a good way to ride,” said the servant.

“The frost’s all gone, I fea—I hope?” I said inquiringly.

“Yes, sir. Lovely morning!” he answered, drawing up the blinds.

In his opinion a lovely morning was characterised by slightly damp, muggy weather; in mine it would have been a daybreak of ultra-Siberian intensity.

I ruefully dressed, lamenting that my will was not a little stronger (nor were thoughts of my other will—and testament—entirely absent), that I might have fled from the trial, or done something to rescue myself from the exposure which I felt must shortly overwhelm me. The levity of the men in the breakfast-room was a source of suffering to me, and even Laura’s voice jarred on my ears as she petitioned her father to let her follow “just a little way”—she was going to ride and see the hounds “throw off,” a ceremony which I devoutly hoped would be confined to those animals—“because it was *too* hard to turn back when the real enjoyment commenced; and she would be good in the pony-carriage for the rest of the week.”

"No, no, my dear," replied the Major, "women are out of place in the hunting field. Don't you think so, Mr. Smoothley?"

"I do indeed, Major," I answered, giving Laura's little dog under the table a fearful kick, as I threw out my foot violently to straighten a crease which was severely galling the inside of my left knee. "You had far better go for a quiet ride, Miss Huntingcrop, and"—how sincerely I added—"I shall be delighted to accompany you; there will be plenty of days for me to hunt when you drive to the meet."

"No, no, Smoothley. It's very kind of you to propose it, but I won't have you sacrificing your day's pleasure," the Major made answer, dashing the crumbs of hope from my hungry lips. "You may go a little way, Laura, if you'll promise to stay with Sir William, and do all that he tells you. You won't mind looking after her, Heathertopper?"

Old Sir William's build would have forbidden the supposition that he was in any way given to activity, even if the stolidity of his countenance had not assured you that caution was in the habit of marking his guarded way; and he made suitable response. I was just debating internally as to the least circuitous mode by which I could send myself a telegram, requiring my immediate presence in town, when a sound of hoofs informed us that the horses were approaching; and gazing anxiously from the window before me, which overlooked the drive in front of the house, I noted their arrival.

Now the horse is an animal which I have always been taught to admire. A "noble animal" he is termed by zoologists, and I am perfectly willing to admit his nobility when he conducts himself with reticence and moderation; but when he gyrates like a teetotum on his hind-legs, and wildly spars at the groom he ought to respect, I cease to recognise any qualities in him but the lowest and most degrading.

Laura hastened to the window, and I rose from the table and followed her.

"You pretty darlings!" she rapturously exclaimed. "Oh! are you going to ride The Sultan, Mr. Smoothley? How nice! I do so want to, but papa won't let me."

"No, my dear, he's not the sort of horse for little girls to ride; but he'll suit you, Smoothley; he'll suit you, I know."

Without expressing a like confidence, I asked, "Is that The Sultan?" pointing to a large chestnut animal at that moment in the attitude which, in a dog, is termed "begging."

"Yes; a picture, isn't he? Look at his legs. Clean as a foal's! Good quarters—well ribbed up—not like one of the waspy greyhounds they call thoroughbred horses nowadays. Look at his condition, too; I've kept that up pretty well, though he's been out of training for some time," cried the Major.

"He's not a racehorse, is he?" I nervously asked.

"He's done a good deal of steeplechasing, and ran once or twice in the early part of this season. It makes

a horse rush his fences rather, perhaps ; but you young fellows like that, I know."

"His—eye appears slightly bloodshot, doesn't it?" I hazarded ; for he was exhibiting a large amount of what I imagine should have been white, in an unsuccessful attempt to look at his tail without turning his head round. "Is he quiet with hounds?"

"Playful—a little playful," was his unassuring reply. "But we must be off, gentlemen. It's three miles to Blackbrook, and it won't do to be late!" And he led the way to the Hall, where I selected my virgin whip from the rack, and swallowing a nip of orange-brandy, which a servant providentially handed to me at that moment, went forth to meet my fate.

Laura, declining offers of assistance from the crowd of pink-coated young gentlemen who were sucking cigars in the porch, was put into the saddle by her own groom. I think she looked to me for aid, but I was constrained to stare studiously in the opposite direction, having a very vague idea of the method by which young ladies are placed in their saddles. Then I commenced, and ultimately effected, the ascent of *The Sultan* ; a process which appeared to me precisely identical with climbing to the deck of a man-of-war.

"Stirrups all right, sir?" asked the groom.

"This one's rather too long. No, it's the other one, I think." One of them didn't seem right, but it was impossible to say which in the agony of the moment.

He surveyed me critically from the front, and then

took up one stirrup to a degree that brought my knee into close proximity with my waistcoat, The Sultan meanwhile exhibiting an uncertainty of temperament which caused me very considerable anxiety. Luckily I had presence of mind to say that he had shortened the leather too much, and there was not much difference between the two, when, with Laura and some seven companions, I started down the avenue in front of the house.

The fundamental principles of horsemanship are three : keep your heels down ; stick in your knees ; and try to look as if you liked it. So I am informed, and I am at a loss to say which of the three is the most difficult of execution. The fact that The Sultan started jerkily some little time before I was ready to begin, thereby considerably deranging such plans as I was forming for guidance, is to be deplored ; for my hat was not on very firmly, and it was extremely awkward to find a hand to restore it to its place when it displayed a tendency to come over my eyes. Conversation under these circumstances is peculiarly difficult ; and I fear that Laura found my remarks somewhat curt and strangely punctuated. The Sultan's behaviour, however, had become meritorious to a high degree ; and I was just beginning to think that hunting was not so many degrees worse than the treadmill when we approached the scene of action.

Before us, as we rounded a turning in the road, a group of some thirty horsemen, to which fresh accessions were constantly being made, chatted together and watched a hilly descent to the right, down which the pack

of hounds, escorted by several officials, was approaching. The Major and his party were cordially greeted, and no doubt like civilities would have been extended to me had I been in a position to receive them ; but, unfortunately I was not ; for, on seeing the hounds, the “ playfulness ” of The Sultan vigorously manifested itself, and he commenced a series of gymnastic exercises to which his previous performances had been a mere farce. I lost my head, but mysteriously kept what was more important—my seat, until the tempest of his playfulness had in some measure abated ; and then he stood still, shaking with excitement. I sat still, shaking—from other causes.

“ Keep your horse’s head to the hounds, will you, sir ? ” was the salutation which the master bestowed on me, cantering up as the pack defiled through a gate ; and indeed The Sultan seemed anxious to kill a hound or two to begin with. “ Infernal Cockney ! ” was, I fancy, the term of endearment he used as he rode on ; but I don’t think Laura caught any of this short but forcible utterance, for just at this moment a cry was raised in the wood to the left, and the men charged through the gate and along the narrow cart-track with a wild rush. Again The Sultan urged on his wild career, half-breaking my leg against the gate-post, as I was very courteously endeavouring to get out of the way of an irascible gentleman behind me who appeared to be in a hurry, and then plunging me into the midst of a struggling, pushing throng of men and horses.

If the other noble sportsmen were not enjoying them-

selves more than I, it was certainly a pity that they had not stayed at home. Where was this going to end? and—but what was the matter in front? They paused, and then suddenly all turned round and charged back along the narrow path. I was taken by surprise, and got out of the way as best I could, pulling my horse back amongst the trees, and the whole cavalcade rushed past me. Out of the wood, across the road, over the opposite hedge, most of them; some turn off towards a gate to the right and away up the rise beyond, passing over which they were soon out of sight.

That The Sultan's efforts to follow them had been vigorous I need not say; but I felt that it was a moment for action, and pulled and tugged and sawed at his mouth to make him keep his head turned away from temptation. He struggled about amongst the trees, and I felt that, under the circumstances, I should be justified in hitting him on the head. I did so; and shortly afterwards—it was not exactly that I was *thrown*, but circumstances induced me to *get off rather suddenly*.

My foot was on my native heath. I was alone, appreciating the charms of solitude in a degree I had never before experienced; but after a few minutes of thankfulness, the necessity of action forced itself on my mind. Clearly, I must not be seen standing at my horse's head gazing smilingly at the prospect—that would never do, for the whole hunt might reappear as quickly as they had gone; so, smoothing out the most troublesome creases in my nether garments, I proceeded to mount. I say "proceeded," for it was a difficult and very gra-

dual operation, but was eventually managed through the instrumentality of a little boy, who held The Sultan's head, and addressed him in a series of forcible epithets that I should never have dared to use: language, however, which, though reprehensible from a moral point of view, seemed to appeal to the animal's feelings, and was at any rate successful.

He danced a good deal when I was once more on his back, and seemed to like going in a series of small bounds, which were peculiarly irritating to sit. But I did not so much mind now, for no critical eye was near to watch my hand wandering to the convenient pommel or to note my taking such other little precautions as the exigencies of the situation, and the necessity for carrying out the first law of nature, seemed to suggest.

Hunting, in this way, wasn't really so very bad. There did not appear to be so very much danger, the morning air was refreshing and pleasant, and the country looked bright. There always seemed to be a gate to each field, which, though troublesome to open at first, ultimately yielded to patience and perseverance and the handle of my whip. I might get home safely after all; and as for my desertion, where every one was looking after himself, it was scarcely likely they could have observed my defection. No; this was not altogether bad fun. I could say with truth for the rest of my life that I "had hunted." It would add a zest to the perusal of sporting literature, and, above all, extend the range of my charity by making me sincerely appreciate men who really rode.

But alas! though clear of the trees practically, I was, metaphorically, very far from being out of the wood. When just endeavouring to make up my mind to come out again some day I heard a noise, and, looking behind me, saw the whole fearful concourse rapidly approaching the hedge which led into the ploughed field next to me on the right. Helter-skelter, on they came. Hounds popping through, and scrambling over. Then a man in pink topping the fence, and on again over the plough; then one in black over with a rush; two, three, four more in different places. Another by himself who came up rapidly, and, parting company with his horse, shot over like a rocket!

All this I noted in a second. There was no time to watch, for The Sultan had seen the opportunity of making up for his lost day, and started off with the rush of an express train. We flew over the field; neared the fence. I was shot into the air like a shuttlecock from a battledore—a moment of dread—then, a fearful shock which landed me lopsidedly somewhere on the animal's neck. He gives a spring which shakes me into the saddle again, and is tearing over the grass field beyond. I am conscious that I am in the same field as the Major, and some three or four other men. We fly on at frightful speed; there is a line of willows in front of us which we are rapidly nearing. It means water, I know. We get—or rather *it comes* nearer—nearer—nearer—ah-h-h! An agony of semi-unconsciousness—a splash, a fearful splash—a struggle . . .

I am on his back, somewhere in the neighbourhood of the saddle: without stirrups, but grimly clutching a confused mass of reins as The Sultan gently canters up the ascent to where the hounds are howling and barking round a man in pink, who waves something brown in the air before throwing it to them. I have no sooner reached the group than the master arrives, followed by some four or five men, conspicuous among whom is the Major.

He hastens to me. To denounce me as an impostor? Have I done anything wrong, or injured the horse?

"I congratulate you, Smoothley, I congratulate you! I promised you a run, and you've had one, and, by Jove! taken the shine out of some of us. My Lord," to the master, "let me present my friend, Mr. Smoothley, to you. Did you see him take the water? You and I made for the Narrows, but he didn't turn away, and went at it as if Sousemere were a puddle. Eighteen feet of water if it's an inch, and with such a take-off and such a landing, there's not a man in the hunt who'd attempt it! Well, Heathertopper! Laura, my dear," for she and the bulky Baronet at this moment arrived at the head of a straggling detachment of followers, "you missed a treat in not seeing Smoothley charge the brook:

"The Swirl is in front, and of it I'm no lover;
There's one way to do it, and that's at a dash;
But Christian is leading, and lightly pops over,
I follow—we rise—down!—No!! done with a splash!

Isn't that it? It was beautiful!"

It might have been in his opinion; in mine it was simply an act of unconscious insanity, which I had rather die than intentionally repeat.

"I didn't see you all the time, Mr. Smoothley; where were you?" Laura asked.

"Where was he?" cried the Major. "Not following you, my dear. He took his own line, and, by Jove! it was a right one!"

It was not in these terms that I had expected to hear the Major addressing me, and it was rather bewildering. Still I trust that I was not puffed up with an unseemly vanity as Laura rode back by my side. She looked lovely with the flush of exercise on her cheek, and the sparkle of excitement in her eyes; and as we passed homewards through the quiet country lanes I forgot the painful creases that were afflicting me, and with as much eloquence as was compatible with the motion of my steed—I ventured!

The blushes deepen on her cheek. She consents on one condition: I must give up hunting.

"You are so rash and daring," she says, softly—*very* softly, "that I should never be happy when you were out."

Can I refuse her anything—even *this*? Impossible!

I promise: vowing fervently to myself to keep my word; and on no account do anything to increase the reputation I made at Huntingcrop Hall.

XX.

ACHATES; OR, WHO WON THE KENILWORTH CUP.

CHAPTER I.

SEVEN o'clock in the morning of a day in early February. The sun is beginning to make his way feebly through the clouds; and the birds in the trees round about Carryl Castle are just tuning up their songs in a careless sort of way, as birds do when they have no nests to make, and nothing to occupy their attention beyond the interchange of slight passages of affection with the chosen brides to whom they will be united on the coming St. Valentine's Day, in accordance with immemorial custom.

The busiest figures in the landscape are two young men who have just issued from the castle, and are making their way down to the road by a bridle path.

"Very kind of you to turn out at this abnormal hour, Beau; but you understand why I am anxious. I want to see if the horse can get anywhere near your mare over three miles; for if he can, he's good enough to put into training for the Grand Military. I have entered

him for your race at Kenilworth, intending to give him a trial there; but you and the mare can tell me just what I want to know, and then I need not disturb his preparation."

Dick Evelyn, the speaker, is the eldest son of a baronet in a neighbouring county, and a shining light in the Household Troops. He addresses his companion as "Beau," not on account of any personal characteristics (though his good-looking face, set-off by a drooping fair moustache, and generally "correct" appearance, might have warranted the title), but as an abbreviation of his name, Lord Beauclerc Carryl. He is, indeed, the youngest son of the Duke of Meadshire, at present visiting his elder brother, the Marquis of St. Asaph, at Carryl Castle, where Dick Evelyn is also staying.

"You say he can jump?" Lord Beauclerc inquired.

"Like a deer. Did I tell where I found him?"

"You only said that you bought him from that tobacco-man who has taken poor Glendare's place."

"Well, it was the Tuesday before you came down," Dick commenced; "we were out with the Gorsehampton. I was riding Bullfinch—a beast I never liked—and after killing at Swinnerton, I found myself at five o'clock about fifteen miles from the castle, in uncommonly heavy rain, on a horse as lame as a tree; and how the deuce I was to reach the house by dinner-time I didn't know. I was leading Bullfinch down a lane when I met Manners, and he offered me a mount. I looked over his stables, and, 'pon my word, never saw

such a sorry lot of beasts in all my life—I wouldn't have given £5 a head for the whole collection. Achates was the most likely looking, so I started on him. There wasn't much time, for it was past six, and I didn't want to be late for dinner; so I set off, thinking that I had my work cut out. I was never so astonished in my life! To do Bullfinch justice, he can jump for ten minutes or so; but he was nothing to this beast, who went at everything as if it had been made for him."

"Did Manners christen him?"

"Yes," Dick replied. "He bought him because he was an excellent match for a horse he used to drive in a dog-cart, and thought the pair would go well in double-harness. I don't suppose Manners was ever what you'd call educated: he picked up scraps of knowledge here and there, but at the tobacco manufactory in White-chapel, where he found most of them, the classics did not flourish; however, he had heard the term *fidus* *Achates* in relation to intimate friendship, and it occurred to him that *Fidus* and *Achates* were probably brothers who were much devoted to each other, so he named the beasts accordingly and harnessed them to the phaeton. Achates was a perfect match for *Fidus*, but he was a good deal more than a match for the coachman. You see, as far as harness went, he was entirely unbroken; but it was different with the carriage—that was broken up small. He was a very willing sort of horse, but he didn't understand the business—didn't enter into the spirit of the thing at all—and when he saw the lodge

gate in front, thought they wanted him to jump it, I suppose; at any rate he charged it before the fellow could get it open. He knocked himself about a good deal, but not seriously; of course the trap was spoilt; Manners landed on his head, so he was all right, and the coachman broke something—arm, I think. When I sent for Bullfinch, I returned Achates, offering to buy him; and as Manners did not know what to do with him, he was glad to sell. You know the fellow, don't you?"

"Yes; St. Asaph had him up to dine once or twice when he came to the county, but he didn't answer. When poor Glendare had to leave England we hoped the Duke would buy the place, but he didn't, and Manners paid the price without flinching. It was useful to him just then, because he had a contract to supply the Prussian army with cigars, and he could grow the material on the estate cheaper than he could buy it; cabbage I thought, but they say it's lettuce—however, that does not matter. St. Asaph thought he was a harmless sort of person and asked him; but he wasn't nice, and one morning got too friendly, don't you know. The hounds were meeting at the castle, and there were a good many fellows at breakfast, and on the sideboard was a big joint of beef amongst other things—a baron, don't you call it?—which seemed to strike Manners a good deal: 'This is what I like, my lord! the good old English style!' he said, after being rather offensive all breakfast; and St. Asaph had been so very courteous

that Manners thought it would point the remark if he slapped him on the back: 'This is what I call cut and come again!' St. Asaph could stand a good deal, but being patted on the back was too much: 'He may *cut* as much as he likes,' my brother muttered to me, 'but I'll take care he never *comes again*!' 'Bad Manners,' St. Asaph calls him."

They turned aside from the road up a somewhat muddy lane and, knocking at the door of a low-roofed farmhouse, were promptly admitted by a hale-looking old man, who ushered them into a tiled kitchen hung round with pictures of hunting and racing celebrities, man and beast, and decorated in such a way as bespoke the residence of a trainer—a position in life which Mat Straightley occupied with considerable success.

"Good morning, my lord—good morning, sir!" he said cheerily. "Yes, sir, I fetched Achates from Mr. Manners' place last night," he answered to Dick Evelyn's question.

"And how's the mare, Straightley?" Beauclerc asked.

"All right, my lord; as well as she can be, and as lively as a kitten. The boys are in the stable, gentlemen; and if you'll just have something to take the edge off the morning air, we'll start. A glass of brown sherry? You know the tap, my lord?"

"No, thanks, Straightley. Too early for sherry, don't you think? There they are! By Jove, she does look well!"

Evelyn glanced out of the window to the stable-

yard into which the animals had just been led. A lively little bay mare, and a long, powerful, short-legged chestnut horse, with a lean head and a well-bred looking neck, set into a pair of perfect shoulders.

"What do you think of him, Straightley?" Dick asked, as he finished the rum and milk which had been substituted for sherry, and took up his hunting crop from the table.

"Looks likely enough, sir, and would be a good deal better for a fortnight's work," Mat answered, as he opened the door, and hurried on to speak to the boys who were leading the animals down the lane.

"I'm deuced anxious about the 15th, Dick; for if I don't pull it off I shall be in a very nasty hole, I can tell you," Lord Beauclerc confided to his friend, as they followed. "Besides, it would be a pleasure to get a pull out of Heidenberg. I've dropped more than I like to think about to that fellow in the last six months: and though I don't mean to say anything against his honesty, the way he got hold of the kings that night we played *écarté* at his place was—well, it was unusual! I'm glad that I'm not going to ride, myself, at Kenilworth, for I should be so nervous, and Rosendale won't make a mistake."

"You don't mean to tell me that you, 'the pillar of a ducal house,' as Manners calls you, could be made uncomfortable by the loss of a few hundreds?" Dick remarked.

"Yes, I'm a *pillar*, all right; but I'm a pillar without

any *capital*," Beauclerc went on, and Dick wondered whether he meant it for a joke. "Besides, there are a good many hundreds depending on this race; however, I don't fear anything. Heidenberg's horse is about the best; but we beat him at Warwick, and meet now on ten pounds better terms. I want some money, and should much prefer getting my own back from him to finding any elsewhere. Is this the ground?" he asked Straightley, seeing that the horses had stopped, and that their attendants were removing the hoods and sheets, and tightening the girths.

"Yes, my lord; you go right round the flag by the cottage yonder, then turn rather sharp off to the left towards where you see another flag on the hill there; round that and the next and then you'll come down to the brook, and home over the hurdles. That's a little over three miles."

Beauclerc was soon in the saddle, and, so far as perfection of seat may be taken as a criterion of jockeyship, there was certainly no fault to find with him as he went lightly over the first hurdle and back again. Dick mounted Achates, and Mat Straightley, who was more than rather critical, could find no fault with the way his legs hung over the saddle. If there was a pin to choose between the two men perhaps the choice would have fallen on Lord Beauclerc; but I don't think there was.

The horse and mare were in a line before Mat: "Are you ready, gentlemen?" he asked. "Then go!" and in three seconds the two were over the fence and well into

the next field, heading for the flag by Straightley's house, the mare, her own length in front, getting over the heavy plough more easily than Achates. In this order they land over a hedge, with a ditch on the take-off side, into the grass : much better going here ; the mare shakes her head and plays with her bit as she feels her rider's light hand on the rein : Achates following with a mighty stride. Easily over some posts and rails, gently in and out of a double, and round the first flag ; the mare with, perhaps, a trifle the better lead than before while ascending the hill. More than half the journey is over, and Beauclerc puts on a little spurt and comes down quickly to the water ; but Achates is not to be shaken off, and they land over the brook simultaneously. It is half a mile to home, over two hurdles, and the mare's rider glances anxiously at his companion, who is pounding away steadily on nearly equal terms with him. There is a slight *jerk* in the mare's stride, and a want of that free spring with which she started, for the pace has been very hot. Over the hurdle Dick is taking it very quietly, and for the first time Beauclerc feels uncomfortable, and inclined to think that he is only keeping the half length ahead on sufferance. They charge the last hurdle together. Neither of the animals have been touched as yet ; but Beauclerc sees that if he is to win he must fight for it, so he takes tight hold of the mare's head, and sets her going. She pluckily responds, and shoots out beyond Achates ; but only for a moment, for when Dick takes

up his whip his horse is immediately seen in advance, and gallops past Straightley first by two lengths.

They pull up as soon as possible, and walk back to him side by side. At length Dick broke the silence.

"I suppose you were trying, Beau?" he asked.

Lord Beauclerc was almost too staggered to speak, but at last he found tongue to reply:

"I was trying hard enough, I assure you!"

"I wasn't particularly. Achates seems to show it more than the mare, but all the same, I could have won a good deal further," Dick answered, hardly knowing what to make of it.

"What's the matter with her, Straightley?" Beauclerc asked, with a tinge of vexation in his voice, as they rejoined the trainer.

"Nothing the matter with her, my lord, but she can't gallop like the chestnut—nor jump, neither; and what's more, he'll be 7 lbs. better by the 15th. I'm afraid it's all up with our chance!" Mat said in a sorrowful tone; but, patting the mare's neck forgivingly, "she could only do her best."

"Yes; there's not much doubt about that, I fancy!" her owner said, as he dismounted—one stage down into the hole he had spoken about, he fancied.

"What nonsense!" Dick burst in. "My dear Beau, what are you thinking of! I sha'n't run him at Kenilworth on any account—of course not! I wouldn't interfere with your book for all the world; but I'll send

him down to Hednesford, and it'll take a good one to beat him for the Grand Military, or I'm much mistaken."

CHAPTER II.

THE 15th of February had dawned, and the sun was shining down brilliantly on Kenilworth racecourse, as if he took an interest in sporting matters; and, indeed, there seems some ground for the supposition, considering how good a whip Phœbus is reported to have been in his younger days. Beauclerc had left his brother's drag, and was loitering about by himself near the paddock, noticing with pleasure the slight print his boots left in the turf, which showed how good was the going. The mare had progressed to her trainer's entire satisfaction, and he was proudly leading her about before her master's admiring eyes. Baron Heidenberg's horse, König, had just arrived, and Beauclerc glanced at it with a shade of anxiety in his face. As he had confided to Evelyn, the Baron had won a heavy amount from him lately, and Beauclerc had backed the mare against König to an extent which he could not help terming heavy, though that was only one item in the book he had made about her. However, there didn't seem much to fear, considering the estimate he could form of the horse's powers; neither had he lost faith in the mare, being rather inclined to believe that Achates was an altogether exceptional animal.

Suddenly Straightley joined him.

"Do you see that, my lord?" he asked, pointing to a big chestnut which had just entered the field. Beauclerc recognised it at once, and he and his trainer gazed into each other's faces.

"Achates! Nonsense, Straightley. What is he here for?"

"To run for this race," answered the trainer savagely, "he's named for it by Mr. Henford."

"Absurd! Why, Mr. Evelyn told me—you heard what he said!"

"Yes, my lord, and I have just heard what that boy said, too," Straightley answered, and they walked towards the groom who was attending to the new arrival.

"Is Mr. Evelyn going to ride, boy?" Beauclerc inquired.

"No, sir. Sam Wyatt has the mount," was the answer. Wyatt was a professional who had often ridden for Evelyn, and who approached at this moment, with a blue jacket showing under his great-coat—Evelyn's colours.

"*They* know it, too," Straightley said as they turned away, jerking his head towards the noisy ring; "the mare's gone back two points in the betting."

"Five to two, bar one!" "Five to two agin Lady May!" resounded from the crowded enclosure. They had been betting six to four against the mare previously, so the secret had oozed out.

"Well, Straightley, we must do our best, that's all!" Beauclerc said, as he left his trainer's side rather hastily; for he did not want to be told that if Achates stood up, Lady May had no chance; he knew that, but he was more hurt at the duplicity of his friend than at the almost certain loss that was coming upon him.

Evelyn had left Carryl, and professed his inability to come to the races; but still Beauclerc was not much surprised, when he had walked about fifty yards, to see his treacherous friend approaching him behind the line of carriages drawn up by the rails.

"I've been looking for you everywhere, Beau! You see, I got away after all!" Dick said.

"So I perceive, Mr. Evelyn; and now I wish you a good morning, sir," Beauclerc answered, turning round.

Dick seemed a good bit astonished, and stood gazing vaguely, for a moment. He evidently had not expected this cut, and appeared quite unable to make it out: but, checking an impulse to use strong language, he followed Beauclerc; who responded to a tap on the shoulder by a contemptuous, rather than an angry stare.

"Lord Beauclerc, we've been friends for a good many years, and we parted friends when I left Carryl last week. You know enough of me to be sure that I don't want to force my society on any one; but all the same, I can't help thinking from your manner that you are labouring under a delusion of some kind, and I should like to put it right."

"There is no delusion, sir," Beauclerc answered.

"Then, what the deuce is it? Will you kindly explain, because I'm not aware of having done anything particularly atrocious since last week?" said Evelyn.

"I think I've seen that animal before, Mr. Evelyn!" and Beauclerc pointed to a group, in which Wyatt was inspecting his horse's trappings preparatory to mounting.

"I've no doubt you have, Lord Beauclerc, and I was just going to tell you about it; but your strange manner repelled the confidence." He was silent for a moment, and then continued: "Look here, Beauclerc, we've been a good deal together since we were boys, and I don't think you've ever known me do anything exceptionally blackguardly?"

"Most certainly not; and I'm, therefore, the more surprised, Evelyn——"

"Will you defer your surprise for half an hour, and put yourself entirely in my hands? Will you?" Dick asked.

For half a second Beauclerc paused. Achates, he felt certain, could win this race. There stood Achates in perfect health and condition. If Evelyn didn't intend to win, he was going to rope his horse and lose on purpose, and that was just about as low a thing to do as to go for the race after the assurance he had given his friend on the morning of the trial. This side of the question seemed very close and conclusive; but, on the other hand, Dick was a gentleman, and so that side of

the scale came down the heavier, and Beauclerc gave consent.

"Have you hedged at all?" Evelyn inquired.

"Not a penny," Beauclerc answered—perhaps just a trifle regretfully.

"And you think that the mare can beat everything but Achates?"

"Yes; I'm pretty sure of that, because——"

Before he could finish the sentence, Heidenberg joined the pair, with a gorgeous-bound betting-book in his hand, and fully equipped for the race.

"I suppose you don't care to do any more about your mare, my lord?" said the Baron.

Beauclerc glanced at Dick, who slightly nodded. To refuse would have been to betray want of confidence, and though Beauclerc really did not care to "do any more," with a stupid absence of decision of character he answered:

"Your supposition is incorrect, Baron; I am quite ready to go on."

"Five to two, then, against Lady May? In thousands?" and Beauclerc nodded assent.

"With you, sir, if you will. Do you back the mare?" the foreigner said to Dick, with whom he was slightly acquainted, and who answered with a bow, "In hundreds, Baron."

Then the bell rang to clear the course for the important race; and Beauclerc, preferring the stand to his brother's drag, ascended the structure with Dick, and

very soon the horses swept past in their preliminary canter. Rosendale, in a bright pink jacket with white sleeves, came first on the mare; then König, a powerful, good-looking horse, ridden by his owner, in black and red. Wyatt's mount attracted a good deal of attention, as did Hades, a handsome black. There were three others, against which you might have obtained long odds.

Beauclerc made efforts at ordinary conversation, but without success; for though Evelyn took matters much in his usual easy way, it was impossible to hide the fact that there was a shadow of some sort between the two men; and, indeed, perhaps they were both too anxious to be thoroughly cheerful.

The start was effected a little to the left of the stand, and immediately afterwards the seven horses swept past in a compact body: they had not jumped as yet. Except by a swindle, Beauclerc could not see how Achates was to be prevented from winning; and he was debating earnestly within himself as to whether he ought not to have warned Rosendale of the danger to be anticipated from the unexpected arrival when the lot came in sight for the second time, Hades leading, galloping hard; König next; Lady May well up, pulling double; three more in straggling order; but Achates—where was he?

"Where's Achates?" Beauclerc asked. The horse could jump, and Wyatt could ride, and altogether the affair looked very ugly for Dick Evelyn. "Ah!

why—it can't be. Yes—there he is! Look! look, Dick!"

At the second fence—some posts and rails—which the horses were just approaching for the second time, was Wyatt, fighting angrily with his refractory mount. Persuasion hadn't succeeded in making him jump, so his jockey was trying abuse. Beauclerc remembered having heard Dick say, "He'd go at a haystack—I don't say jump it, but he'd try;" and the fence which stopped him now was nothing. The others rushed over, and then, momentarily inspired by the example, Wyatt's 'beast went at it also with a feeble sort of hop, knocked all his four legs hard, and, having tumbled down, didn't seem to care at all about getting up any more.

"Look at him! Do you see?" cried Beauclerc, gazing through his field-glasses.

"No, I don't," Dick answered, with his glass focussed on the performance; "and if you can see Achates, all I can say is I congratulate you on your eyesight, for that noble animal is at the present moment comfortably reposing in his stall at Hednesford."

"What! why—who, then?—" vaguely cried Beauclerc, less than ever able to make it out.

"I'll tell you directly. Look out! Here they come!" And they did come; only three in it now, König leading, but evidently with labour; then, neck-and-neck, Hades and the mare; but she is going well within herself, and the man on Hades is hard at work.



At the distance Rosendale sets her going, and Beauclerc felt her between his knees as he looked—he knew that bounding stride so well! On she comes up to König's shoulders—level—a head—a neck—half a length—a length in front: like a greyhound, like a deer, like just whatever gallops best of all. Hades is nearly done with: Heidenberg sits down and begins to ride furiously; but I think Rosendale has backed his mount rather heavily, for he laughs aloud as his pink jacket shoots past the post first by three lengths.

Beauclerc laughs too, as a man may be permitted to do when he is £12,000 to the good.

“Yah!” shouted the crowd as the supposititious Achates rejoins his companions by crossing the first fence in the wrong direction; and Evelyn gives his explanation:

“I told Manners how good Achates was, and that I was going to enter him for this race and some others. Manners thought that if Achates could jump, Fidus, being similarly shaped, must be gifted with similar powers. (You may judge what a perfect match the two are.) So he entered his animal, and engaged Wyatt to ride; and if Mr. Wyatt has not mounted one of my old jackets he's got something uncommonly like it.”

“But how is it that the mare went back, and wasn't favourite at the start?” Beauclerc wondered.

“I fancy that is to be attributed to one of Straightley's boys, who probably made the same mistake as you. He knew that the horse he fetched from Manners'

stables had beaten the mare, and not knowing that I had bought Achates and taken him away, naturally thought that it was Fidus. That's the only way I can see out of it, at least," Dick answered.

By this time Fidus had reached the neighbourhood of the paddock, where the two friends stood, and they looked at him with varying emotions. Wyatt dismounted, and, not at all abashed at that little matter of the borrowed jacket, gave a grin expressive of comic disgust as he slid from the saddle and acknowledged Dick's presence.

"And so that is Fidus, is it?" Beauclerc asked.

"That is the noble animal, though he doesn't appear to advantage with a saddle and bridle on, especially with a jockey on his back and a plaited mane," Dick replied.

Beauclerc looked at the unconscious cause of his late perplexity, and then at the card.

"What are you studying?" Dick asked.

"There's no Fidus down here?" Beauclerc said, reading the list of horses.

"I dare say not, but there's a 'Juno' though. In some strange way Manners found out that Fidus wasn't a name, and he discovered that Juno was; so with a trifling disregard for gender the animal was rechristened. He told me he knew Juno was a 'proper name.' I was going to say, under the circumstances, it was a very improper name, only I did not see the good of explaining."

In the paddock, watching the saddling of a horse St. Asaph was going to run in the next race, Beauclerc began to knock a hole in the ground with his heel, watching the excavation attentively. Presently he gave tongue :

"I say, Dick—I beg your pardon—I had a very unhappy half-hour, I can tell you; but I thoroughly deserved it for behaving like a cad, in not being assured that a gentleman's word is more worthy of credence than a fellow's eyesight."

Dick Evelyn smiled very kindly :

"Poor old Beau," he said, "you didn't suppose that I was going to put you in a hole, did you?" and then they strolled off arm in arm.

I don't think that their friendship was at all decreased because of the misunderstanding which took place the day that the Kenilworth Cup was not won by Achates.

XXI.

ONLY THE MARE.

WHEN one opens a suspicious-looking envelope and finds something about "Mr. Shopley's respectful compliments" on the inside of the flap, the chances are that Mr. Shopley is hungering for what we have Ovid's authority for terming *irritamenta malorum*. Not wishing to have my appetite for breakfast spoiled, I did not pursue my researches into a communication of this sort which was amongst my letters on a certain morning in November, but turned over the pile until the familiar caligraphy of Bertie Peyton caught my eye; for Bertie was Nellie's brother, and Nellie Peyton, it had been decided, would shortly cease to be Nellie Peyton; a transformation for which I was the person most responsible. Bertie's communication was therefore seized with avidity. It ran as follows:—

"The Lodge, Holmesdale.

"MY DEAR CHARLIE,

"I sincerely hope that you have no important engagements just at present, as I want you down here most particularly.

"You know that there was a small race-meeting at Bibury the other day. I rode over on Little Lady, and found a lot of the 140th Dragoons there; that conceited young person Blankney amongst the number. Now, although Blankney has a very considerable personal knowledge of the habits and manners of the ass, he doesn't know much about horses; and for that reason he saw fit to read us a lecture on breeding and training, pointing his moral and adorning his tale with a reference to my mare—whose pedigree, you know, is above suspicion. After, however, he had kindly informed us what a thoroughbred horse ought to be, he looked at Little Lady and said, 'Now, I shouldn't think that thing was thoroughbred!' It ended by my matching her against that great raw-boned chestnut of his: three and a half miles over the steeplechase course, to be run at the Holmesdale Meeting, on the 4th December.

"As you may guess, I didn't want to win or lose a lot of money, and when he asked what the match should be for, I suggested '£20 a side.' 'Hardly worth while making a fuss for £20!' he said, rather sneerily. '£120, if you like!' I answered, rather angrily, hardly meaning what I said; but he pounced on the offer. Of course I couldn't retract, and so, very stupidly, I plunged deeper into the mire, and made several bets with the fellows who were round us. They gave me 3 to 1 against the mare, but I stand to lose nearly £500.

"You see now what I want. I ride quite 12 stone, as you know; the mare is to carry 11 stone, and you can

just manage that nicely. I know you'll come if you can, and if you telegraph I'll meet you.

"Yours ever,

"BERTIE PEYTON.

"P.S.—Nellie sends love, and hopes to see you. No one is here, but the aunt is coming shortly."

I was naturally anxious to oblige him, and luckily had nothing to keep me in town; so the afternoon saw me rapidly speeding southwards, and the evening comfortably domiciled at The Lodge.

Bertie, who resided there with his sister, was not a rich man. £500 was a good deal more than he could afford to lose, and poor little Nellie was in a great flutter of anxiety and excitement in consequence of her brother's rashness. As for the mare, she could gallop and jump; and though we had no means of ascertaining the abilities of Blankney's chestnut, we had sufficient faith in our Little Lady to enable us to come "up to the scratch smiling;" and great hopes that we should be enabled to laugh at the result in strict accordance with the permission given in the old adage, "Let those laugh who win."

It was not very pleasant to rise at an abnormal hour every morning, and, arrayed in great-coats and comforters sufficient for six people, to rush rapidly about the country; but it was necessary. I was a little too heavy, and we could not afford to throw away any weight, nor did I wish to have my saddle reduced to the size of a

cheese-plate, as would have been my fate had I been unable to reduce myself. Breakfast, presided over by Nellie, compensated for all matutinal discomforts; and then she came round to the stables to give her equine prototype an encouraging pat and a few words of advice and endearment which I verily believe the gallant little mare understood, for it rubbed its nose against her shoulder as though it would say, "Just you leave it in my hands—or rather, to my feet—and I'll make it all right!" Then we started for our gallop, Bertie riding a steady old iron-grey hunter.

The fourth of December arrived, and the mare's condition was splendid. "As fit as a fiddle" was the verdict of Smithers, a veterinary surgeon who had done a good deal of training in his time, and who superintended our champion's preparation; and though we were ignorant of the precise degree of fitness to which fiddles usually attain, he seemed pleased, and so consequently were we. Unfortunately, on this morning Bertie's old hunter proved to be very lame, so I was forced to take my last gallop by myself; and with visions of success on the morrow, I passed rapidly through the keen air over the now familiar way; for the course was within a couple of miles of the house, and so we had the great advantage of being able to accustom the mare to the very journey she would have to take.

Bertie was in a field at the back of the stables when I neared home again. "Come on!" he shouted, pointing to a nasty, hog-backed stile, which separated us. I

gave Little Lady her head, and she cantered up to it, lighting on the other side like a very bird! Bertie didn't speak as I trotted up to him, but he looked up into my face with a triumphant smile more eloquent than words.

"You've given her enough, haven't you?" he remarked, patting her neck, as I dismounted in the yard.

"You've given her enough" usually signifies "you've given her too much." But I thought not, and we walked round to the house tolerably well convinced that the approaching banking transactions would be on the right side of the book.

Despite a walk with Nellie, and the arrival of a pile of music from town, the afternoon passed rather slowly; perhaps we were too anxious to be cheerful. To make matters worse, dinner was to be postponed till nine o'clock, for the aunt was coming, and Nellie was afraid the visitor would be offended if they did not wait for her.

"You look very bored and tired, sir!" said Nellie, pouting prettily; "I believe you'd yawn if it wasn't rude!"

I assured her that I could not, under any circumstances, be guilty of such an enormity.

"It's just a quarter past seven. We'll go and meet the carriage, and then perhaps you'll be able to keep awake until dinner-time!" and so with a look of dignity which would have been very effective if the merry smile in her eyes had been less apparent after, the little lady swept out of the room; to return shortly arrayed in furs,

a most coquettish-looking hat, and the smallest and neatest possible pair of Balmoral boots, which in their efforts to appear strong and sturdy only made their extreme delicacy more decided.

"Come, sleepy boy!" said she, holding out a grey-gloved hand. I rose submissively, and followed her out of the snug drawing-room to the open air.

Bertie was outside, smoking.

"We are going to meet the aunt, dear," explained Nellie. "I'm afraid she'll be cross, because it's so cold."

"She's not quite so inconsequent as that, I should fancy; but it is cold, and isn't the ground hard!" I said.

"It *is* hard!" cried Bertie, stamping vigorously. "By Jove! I hope it's not going to freeze!" and afflicted by the notion—for a hard frost would have rendered it necessary to postpone the races—he hurried off to the stables, to consult one of the men who was weather-wise.

Some stone steps led from the terrace in front of the house to the lawn; at either end of the top-step was a large globe of stone, and on to one of these thoughtless little Nellie climbed. I stretched out my hand, fearing that the weather had made it slippery, but before I could reach her she slipped and fell.

"You rash little creature!" I said, expecting that she would spring up lightly.

"Oh! my foot!" she moaned; and gave a little shriek of pain as she put it to the ground.

I took her in my arms, and, summoning her maid, carried her to the drawing-room.

"Take off her boot," I said to the girl, but Nellie could not bear to have her foot touched, and feebly moaned that her arm hurt her.

"Oh, pray send for a doctor, sir!" implored the maid, while Nellie only breathed heavily, with half-closed eyes; and horribly frightened I rushed off, hardly waiting to say a word to the poor little sufferer.

"Whatever is the matter?" Bertie cried, as I burst into the harness-room.

"Where's the doctor?" I replied, hastily. "Nellie's hurt herself—sprained her ankle, and hurt her arm—broken it, perhaps!"

"How? When?" he asked.

"There's no time to explain. She slipped down. Where's the doctor?"

"Our doctor is ill, and has no substitute. There's no one nearer than Lawson, at Oakley, and that's ten miles, very nearly."

"Then I must ride at once," I reply.

"Saddle my horse as quickly as possible," said Bertie to the groom.

"He's lame, sir, can't move!" the man replied, and I remembered that it was so.

"Put a saddle on one of the carriage-horses—anything so long as there's no delay."

"They're out, sir! Gone to the station. There's nothing in the stable—only the mare; and to gallop

her to Oakley over the ground as it is to-night will pretty well do for her chance to-morrow—to say nothing of the twelve miles back again. The carriage will be home in less than an hour, sir,” the man remonstrated.

“It may be, you don’t know, the trains are so horribly unpunctual. Saddle the mare, Jarvis, as quickly as you can—every minute may be of the utmost value!” As Bertie spoke the *faintest* look of regret showed itself on his face for a second; for of course he knew that such a journey would very materially affect, if it did not entirely destroy, the mare’s chance.

Jarvis, who I think had been speculating, very reluctantly took down the saddle and bridle from their pegs, but I snatched them from his arms, and, assisted by Bertie, was leading her out of the stable in a very few seconds.

“Hurry on! Never mind the mare—good thing she’s in condition,” said Bertie, who only thought now of his sister. “I’ll go and see the girl.”

“I can cut across the fields, can’t I, by the cross roads?” I asked, settling in the saddle.

“No! no! Keep to the highway; it’s safer at night. Go on!” I heard him call as I went at a gallop down the cruelly hard road.

The ground rang under the mare’s feet, and in spite of all my anxiety for Nellie I could not help feeling one pang of regret for Little Lady, whose free, bounding action augured well for what her chances would have been on the morrow—chances which I felt were rapidly dying out; for if this journey didn’t lame her nothing

would. Stones had just been put down, as a matter of course ; but there was no time for picking the way, and taking tight hold of her head we sped on.

About a mile from the Lodge I came to the cross roads. Before me was a long vista of stones—regular rocks, so imperfectly were they broken : to the right was the smoother and softer pathway over the fields—perfect going in comparison with the road. Just over this fence, a hedge, and with hardly another jump I should come again into the highway, saving quite two miles by the cut. Bertie had said “Don’t,” but probably he had spoken thoughtlessly, and it was evidently the best thing to do, for the time I saved might be of the greatest value to poor little suffering Nellie. I pulled up, and drew the mare back to the opposite hedge. She knew her work thoroughly. Two bounds took her across the road ; she rose—the next moment I was on my back, shot some distance into the field, and she was struggling up from the ground. There had been a post and rail whose existence I had not suspected, placed some six feet from the hedge on the landing side. She sprang up, no bones were broken ; and I, a good deal shaken and confused, rose to my feet, wondering what to do next. I had not had time to collect my thoughts when I heard the rattle of a trap on the road ; it speedily approached, and the moonlight revealed the jolly features of old Tom Heathfield, a friendly farmer.

“Accident, sir ?” he asked, pulling up. “What ! Mr. Vaughan !” as he caught sight of my face. “What’s the——why ! that ain’t the mare, sure *lie* !”

All the neighbourhood was in a ferment of excitement about the races, and the sight of Little Lady in such a place at such a time struck horror to the honest old farmer.

"Yes, it is—I'm sorry to say. Miss Peyton has met with an accident. I was going for the doctor, and unfortunately there was nothing else in the stable."

"You was going to Oakley, I s'pose, sir? It'll be ruination to the mare. Miss Peyton hurt herself! I'll bowl over, sir; it won't take long; this little horse o' mine can trot a good 'un; and I can bring the doctor with me. The fences, there, is mended with wire. You'd cut the mare to pieces."

"I can't say how obliged to you I am——"

"Glad of the opportunity of obliging Miss Peyton—very glad indeed, sir!" He was just starting when he checked himself. "There's a little public-house about a hundred yards farther on; if you don't mind waiting there I'll send Smithers to look at the mare. I pass his house. All right, sir."

His rough little cob started off at a pace for which I had not given it credit; and I slowly followed, leading the mare towards the glimmering light which Heathfield had pointed out. My charge stepped out well, and I didn't think that there was anything wrong, though I was glad, of course, to have a professional opinion.

A man was hanging about the entrance to the public-house, and with his assistance the mare was bestowed in a kind of shed, half cow-house, half stable; and as

the inside of the establishment did not look by any means inviting, I lit a cigar and lounged about outside, awaiting the advent of Smithers.

He didn't arrive; and in the course of wandering to and fro I found myself against a window. Restlessly I was just moving away when a voice inside the room repeated the name of *Blankney*. I started, and, turning round, looked in. It was a small apartment, with a sanded floor, and two persons were seated on chairs before the fire conversing earnestly. One of them was a middle-aged man, clad in a brown great-coat with a profusion of fur collar and cuffs which it would scarcely be libel to term "mangy." He was the owner of an unwholesome, pasty face, decorated as to the chin with a straggling crop of bristles which he would have probably termed an imperial.

"Wust year I ever 'ad!" he exclaimed (and a broken pane in the window enabled me to hear distinctly). "The Two Thousand 'orse didn't run; got in deep over the Derby; Hascot was hawful; and though I had a moral for the Leger, it came to grief."

His own morals, judging from his appearance and conversation, appeared to have followed the example of that for the Leger.

"I can't follow your plans about this race down here, though," said his companion, a younger man, who seemed to hold the first speaker in great awe despite his confessions of failure. "Don't you say that this young Blankney's horse can't get the 'distance?'"

"I do. He never was much good, I 'ear; never won nothing, though he's run hurdle-races two or three times; and since Phil Kelly's been preparing of him for this race he's near about broke down. His legs swells up like bolsters after his gallops; and he can't hardly get three miles at all, I don't believe, without he's pulled up and let lean against something on the journey to rest hisself."

"And yet you're backing him?"

"And yet I'm backing of him."

"This young Peyton's mare can't be worse?" said the younger man interrogatively.

"That mare, it's my belief, would stand at eight to one for the Grand National if she was entered, and some of the swells saw 'er. She's a real good un!" replied the man with the collar.

"I see. You've got at her jockey. You're an artful one, you are!"

As the jockey to whom they alluded, I was naturally much interested.

"No, I ain't done that, neither. He's a gentleman, and it's no use talkin' to such as 'im. They ain't got the sense to take up a good thing when they see it—though, for the matter o' that, some of the perfessionals is as bad as the gentlemen—they as is gentlemen, I mean, for some of the reg'lar gentlemen riders is downy and comfortable. All's fair in love and war, says I; and this 'ere's war."

"Does Blankney know how bad his horse is?"

"No, bless yer! That ain't Phil Kelly's game." (Kelly was, I knew, the man who had charge of my opponent's horse.)

"Well then, just explain, will you; for *I* can't see."

From the recesses of his garment the elder man pulled out a short stick about fifteen inches in length, at the end of which was a loop of string; and from another pocket he produced a small paper parcel.

"D'yer know what that is? That's a 'twitch.' D'yer know what that is? That's med'cine. I love this 'ere young feller's mare so much I'm a-goin' to give it some nicey med'cine myself; and this is the right stuff. I've been up to the house to-day, and can find my way into the stable to-night when it's all quiet. Just slip this loop over 'er lip, and she'll open 'er mouth. Down goes the pill, and as it goes down the money goes into my pocket. Them officer fellers and their friends have been backing Blankney's 'orse; but Phil Kelly will take care that they hear at the last moment that he's no good. Then they'll rush to lay odds on the mare—and the mare won't win."

They laughed, and nudged each other in the side, and I felt a mighty temptation to rush into the room and nudge their heads with my fist. Little Lady's delicate lips, which Nellie had so often petted, to be desecrated by the touch of such villains as these!

While struggling to restrain myself I heard a step behind me, and, turning round, I saw Smithers. We proceeded to the stable; and I hastily recounted to him

what had happened, and what I had heard, as he examined the mare by the aid of a bull's-eye lantern. He passed his hand very carefully over her, whilst I looked on with anxious eyes.

"She's knocked a bit of skin off here, you see." He pointed to a place a little below her knee, and, drawing a small box from his pocket, anointed the leg. "But she's all right. All right, ain't you, old lady?" he said, patting her; and his cheerful tone convinced me that he was satisfied. "We'll lead her home. I'll go with you, sir; and it's easy to take means to prevent any foul play to-night."

When we reached home the doctor was there, and pronounced that, with the exception of a slightly sprained ankle, Nellie had sustained no injury.

Rejoicing exceedingly, we proceeded to the stable; Heathfield, who heard my story, and who was delighted at the prospect of some fun, asking permission to accompany us.

Collars had doubtless surveyed the premises carefully, for he arrived about eleven o'clock, and clambered quietly and skilfully into the hayloft above the stable, after convincing himself that all was quiet inside. He opened the trap-door, and down came a foot and leg, feeling about to find a resting-place on the partition which divided Little Lady's loose box from the other stalls. Bertie and I took hold of the leg, and assisted him down, to his intense astonishment; while Heathfield and a groom gave chase to, and ulti-

mately captured, his friend, the watcher on the threshold.

* * * * *

"If I'm well enough to do *anything* I'm well enough to lie on the sofa; and there's really *no* difference between a sofa and an easy-chair—if my foot is resting—and I'm sure the carriage is *easier* than *any* chair; and it can't matter about my foot being an 'inch or two higher or lower—and as for shaking, that's all nonsense. It's very unkind *indeed* of you not to want to take me; and if you won't, directly you're gone I'll get up, and walk about, *and stamp!*"

Thus Nellie, in answer to advice that she should remain at home. How it ended may easily be guessed; and though we tried to be dignified, as we drove along, to punish her for her wilfulness, her pathetic little expressions of sorrow that she should "fall down and hurt herself, and be such a trouble to everybody," and child-like assurances that she would "try not to do so any more," soon made us smile, and forget our half-pretended displeasure. So with the aunt to take care of her, in case Bertie and I were insufficient, we reached the course.

The first three races were run, and then the card said:—

3.15 Match, £120 a side, over the Steeplechase Course, about three miles and a half.

1. Mr. Blankney, 140th R.D.G., ch. h. Jibboom, 11st. 7lb., rose, black and gold cap.

2. Mr. Peyton, b. m. Little Lady, 11st. sky blue, white cap.

Blankney was sitting on the regimental drag, arrayed in immaculate boots and breeches, and after the necessary weighing ceremony had been gone through, he mounted the great Jibboom, which Phil Kelly had been leading about: the latter gentleman had a rather anxious look on his face, but Blankney evidently thought he was on a good one, and nodded confidently to his friends on the drag as he lurched down the course.

Little Lady was brought up to me, Smithers being in close attendance.

"I *shall* be so glad if you win," Nellie found opportunity to whisper.

"What will you give me?" I greedily inquire.

"*Anything* you ask me," is the reply; and my heart beats high as, having thrown off my overcoat, weighed and mounted, Little Lady bounds down the course, and glides easily over the hurdle in front of the stand.

Bertie and Smithers were waiting at the starting-place; and, having shaken hands with Blankney, to whom Bertie introduced me, I went apart to exchange the last few sentences with my friends.

Bertie is a trifle pale, but has confidence; and Smithers seems to possess a large supply of the latter quality. In however high esteem we hold our own opinions, we are glad of professional advice when it comes to the push; and I seek instructions.

"No, sir, don't you wait on him. Go away as hard as you can directly the flag drops. I don't like the look

of that chestnut's legs—or, rather, I *do* like the look of them for our sakes. Go away as hard as ever you can; but take it easy at the fences: and, excuse me, sir, but just let the mare have her head when she jumps, and she'll be all right. People talk about 'lifting horses at their fences:' I only knew one man who could do it, and he made mistakes."

I nod; smiling as cheerfully as anxiety will permit me. The flag falls, and Little Lady skims over the ground, the heavy chestnut thundering away behind.

Over the first fence—a hedge—and then across a ploughed field; rather hard going, but not nearly so bad as I expected it would have been: the mare moving beautifully. Just as I reach the second fence a boy rushes across the course, baulking us; and before I can set her going again Jibboom has come up level, and is over into the grass beyond, a second before us; but I shoot past and again take up the running. Before us are some posts and rails—rather nasty ones; the mare tops them, and the chestnut hits them hard with all four legs. Over more grass; and in front, flanked on either side by a crowd of white faces, is the water-jump. I catch hold of the bridle and steady her; and then, with just one touch of the whip—needless—she rises, flies through the air, and lands lightly on the other side. Half a minute after I hear a heavy splash; but when, after jumping the hurdle into the course, I glance over my shoulder, the chestnut is still pounding away behind: they had made a mistake, but picked themselves up

undamaged. As I skim along past the stand the first time round and the line of carriages opposite, I catch sight of a waving white handkerchief: it is Nellie; and my confused glimpse imperfectly reveals Bertie and Smithers standing on the box.

I had seen visions of a finish, in which a certain person clad in a light-blue jacket had shot ahead just in the nick of time, and landed the race by consummate jockeyship after a neck-and-neck struggle for the last quarter of a mile. This did not happen, however, for, as I afterwards learned, the chestnut refused a fence before he had gone very far, and, having at last been got over, came to grief at the posts and rails the second time round. Little Lady cantered in alone, Blankney strolling up some time afterwards.

There is no need to make record of Bertie's delight at the success. We messed next day with the 140th. Blankney and his brethren were excessively friendly, and seemed pleased and satisfied; as most assuredly were we. Blankney opines that he went rather too fast at the timber; but a conviction seemed to be gaining ground towards the close of the evening that he had not gone fast enough at any period of the race.

And for Nellie? She kept her promise, and granted my request; and very soon after the ankle is well we shall require the services of other horses—grey ones!

XXII.

AN ECCENTRIC CHASE.

CHAPTER I.

A MAN who strolls into his club after an absence, and is greeted with a cheery "Hallo! Here he is again! How are you?" experiences one of the small pleasures which go towards making life comfortable, and my friends at the Smoking Room were dissembling very successfully, or they were really glad to see me, as, after being kept away for a short time for family reasons—the death of an uncle more rich in money than in amiability or affection—I re-entered the portals of that agreeable institution and found an extremely good-tempered party sitting round the fire.

"Well, Charlie, did the poor old boy cut up well?" Harquier asks, abandoning the sentimental for the practical view of the question.

"Gorgeously," I reply, "though I only have a very small slice—£500. Several metropolitan and provincial asylums benefit, and the balance is, as usual when rich men leave money, distributed among those who do not in the least want it."

"Got £500, eh?" says my particular friend Leonard, as the general conversation which was in progress when I entered the club continues. "Lucky beggar! I wish I had. It's always you fellows who don't care about such things that get them. Why do the richest men in the club invariably win all the sweeps?"

"I can't answer conundrums," I reply, "and I don't see where my luck comes in. What would you do with £500?"

"I should make it £10,000," Leonard answers decidedly.

"A most excellent suggestion, which only one trifling circumstance prevents me from putting into immediate effect—I haven't the slightest notion how to set about it," I tell him.

"Back Muffin Boy for the Gloucester Cup," he solemnly rejoins.

"Good thing, you believe?"

"Coining money, my dear fellow, simply. Look here!" he continued, taking up the evening paper. "He's now at 25 to 1—33 to 1 at Manchester, but you very likely wouldn't get such good odds. You might depend on 20 to 1, however, certainly, and—there you are!"

"If Muffin Boy is where he ought to be, that is to say?" I inquire.

"Just look here!" Leonard begins again; and after an elaborate disquisition, showing what this excellent creature had done at different places under different weights, he proves to demonstration that the Glou-

cester Cup is an absolute certainty for him, and would be hardly less so if he had 12lbs. more to carry.

The tale is plausible, and the reasons why the horse did not win at Goodwood sound quite convincing. Leonard, too, is an admirable judge both of horses and of racing—two very different things—and the result of our conversation is that I hand him over a cheque for the amount of my legacy to be invested on Muffin Boy at the best obtainable odds, which Leonard is of opinion will assuredly average 20 to 1. £500 was of no particular use to me, who had an income amply sufficient for all requirements, but £10,000 would be serviceable in a variety of ways, and I passed a good deal of time in studying the market odds, and inwardly debating what to do with the haul when it was safely landed.

A couple of days passed. Muffin Boy kept his place at the tag end of the list, while Ophelia and King Pippin, the two favourites, gradually advanced to shorter odds. Evidently the party interested in my horse were managing him well, and I went round to the club to see Leonard and congratulate him on our prospects, wondering meantime how I could repay him for the splendid service he had done me.

"Mr. Leonard was here inquiring for you, sir," a waiter tells me, as I pass in. "He wanted to see you particularly, and said he would look in presently if he could manage it, sir."

Evidently to tell me that the money was safely on, as I had been expecting to hear; so with an increased

feeling of satisfaction I joined the group by the fire and lighted a cigarette.

"Who's going to win at Gloucester?" presently inquires Herries.

"King Pippin," Caplett replies. "A certainty I should say. You can't get 2 to 1 this afternoon, and it'll very likely be 6 to 4 on him when he starts. Ophelia's gone wrong. Here's Russford, ask him," he continued, as the owner of the favourite made his appearance. "You're going to win next week, aren't you, Russford?" Caplett inquires.

"I fancy so. I'm backing him myself, and it seems a good thing. There was nothing to beat but Ophelia, and she's out of it," he answers, and the response makes me begin to feel rather uncomfortable. We are accustomed to share our good things freely when we know anything at the Smoking Room, and I have not the slightest wish to keep to myself what, since Monday evening, I have looked on as my brilliant scheme.

"Why shouldn't Muffin Boy win? He beat you at the Epsom Spring Meeting at even weights, Russford?" I suggest, remembering this much of what Leonard had said.

"Quite so. But King Pippin, who wasn't nearly fit then, was never in such form as he is now, and Muffin Boy has steadily gone off all the year," Russford answers, and I remember that this was not by any means what Leonard had said.

"Then you think Muffin Boy can't win? Harford's

confident, I believe," I remark, for of his owner's belief in his powers Leonard had informed me.

"Say was confident last week, and you'll be near the mark. There are two excellent reasons why Harford won't beat me. In the first place, his horse couldn't if he wanted him to; and, in the second place, he doesn't. He will start Muffin Boy to make running for Fair Rosamond, and declare to win with her. You may depend upon it, Charlie, my boy," Russford goes on, seeing that I look disturbed; "they were tried on Saturday, and the mare's far the best at the weights, though she isn't good enough to beat the King, I fancy. Aren't you going to stay and dine?" he asks, as I rise abruptly.

"In about half an hour," I reply, and instructing the servants to tell Mr. Leonard I particularly want to see him if he calls, jump into a hansom and speed away towards Victoria Street, where he has a flat.

"Mr. Leonard in?" I ask, when his man appears.

"No, sir. Just gone to Paris. Started a few minutes ago—you must almost have passed him as you come, sir, if that was from Charing Cross way. Master was inquiring whether you had called, sir," the man added.

I looked at my watch. Just time to catch him before the mail goes if the man drives quickly, so into the hansom I plunge, and off we go to Charing Cross. But the cabby is more willing than skilful, and affords a new proof of the accuracy of the proverb, "More haste, less speed." In whipping round a corner the wheel catches

a kerbstone, down comes the horse, a regular cropper, and though I save the tumble I had half foreseen, the mischief is done. It takes two or three minutes to pick up the horse, which is not hurt, but just reaches Charing Cross in time to see the mail steaming away over the bridge.

Perhaps he has left a letter at the club giving me some information? I call in passing, bound back to Victoria Street to find out where a telegram will reach the troublesome fugitive.

"Mr. Leonard was here a few minutes ago. Gone to Paris, sir," a waiter tells me.

"Did he leave any note or message?"

"No, sir. Wasn't here more than five minutes," the man says; so muttering what are not precisely blessings on Leonard's erratic proceedings, I return to his chambers.

"Didn't catch master, sir?" the servant asks.

"No. Just missed train. Where is he staying in Paris?" I inquire.

"Well, sir, I don't rightly know. Master generally goes to the Imperial, as you are aware, sir; but he said last time it was so horrid dirty he shouldn't go again. Master was speaking about Meurice's the other day, but there was another gentleman here talking about another hotel in the Rue de la—I didn't quite get the name, I'm afraid—and he said he thought he should try that. He might go to the Imperial, but I wasn't to send his letters, as his movements was very uncertain, sir."

What was to be done next? Depending on letters or telegrams on such vague directions was manifestly out of the question. There was nothing for it but to go to Paris by the morning train and trust to luck in running him down somewhere or other. About the £500 I did not much care. Losing it all would not have afflicted me; but to make the ring a present by backing a brute that wasn't intended to win seemed such a grossly idiotic affair that I was bent on averting the absurdity at all hazards. For a moment, on arriving at home to dress for a tardy dinner, I hoped that the expected letter might be there. No! A couple of bills, some tickets for a theatre, an invitation to shoot, and an envelope in Harquier's writing, the contents of which I knew without opening it, as he had told me when I met him in the afternoon that he had just written to say he could not dine with me as I had asked him. A glance at the special edition of the *Evening Standard* showed Muffin Boy at 25 to 1, Ophelia struck out of the Gloucester Cup at 3.20, King Pippin at 7 to 4 taken and wanted, &c., &c. Paris by the first train is the nearest way out of the irritating misfortune.

CHAPTER II.

To rise at an offensively preposterous hour on a wet morning, drive to an uncomfortable railway station, get on board a damp slippery boat, and cross the Channel in

a choppy sea, are such dismal doings that before we were half-way over I wished that I had made up my mind to let the whole thing slide and say no more about it. But then came thoughts of the excellent story some fellows at the Smoking Room would make out of the affair. How Charley Welton was going to make a fortune on the turf, only didn't because the Judge wouldn't give it to the one that got off best and finished first half way round; and that sort of thing, which would have been very funny indeed with any other hero. I clambered into the train at Boulogne, where it was raining harder than it was at Folkestone, only hoping that Leonard might not have taken refuge at the hotel in the Rue de la—something that his man did not rightly remember.

For once in the course of my expedition something like luck seemed to attend my chase. Monsieur Leonard had gone to the Imperial, whither I first drove, but Monsieur was out for the moment: his room was 21. Run to the ground at last, I thought, and giving the porter, who knew us both, particular instructions to tell Leonard directly he came in that I had arrived, and wanted him to dine with me, I strolled down the boulevard towards an English club, of which I was a member, and where I thought it possible that he might be; for, though not belonging to the club himself, many of our friends did. Leonard was not there, however, though I found a man who had seen him that afternoon, so I returned to the Imperial.

Had M. Leonard come back? He had, almost the

moment after Monsieur went out, and left a note for Monsieur, which the speaker handed to me. I opened it in fear and trembling. Surely he had not slipped off again? But he had.

"DEAR CHARLIE," the note ran,—

"What the deuce are you doing over here? Wish I'd known you were coming, and we'd have travelled together. Sorry I can't stay to dine, but I'm off to Nice by the 7.15. Got to see about a villa for my uncle.—
Yours, H. L."

Nice! A little journey of something over twenty-four hours! But I would have followed him now if he had gone to the Fiji Islands. Why had I not left a note telling him that Muffin Boy wasn't meant for the Gloucester Cup? However, the next thing was to go to Nice, and there was certainly plenty of time on the journey to think what I would do when I got there. The Continental Bradshaw is a particularly irritating work at all times, especially for a journey where one gets the "a.m." and "p.m." mixed up. The 7.15 train by which Leonard had gone I could not have caught, for it was nearly 7 when I reached the Imperial, and the station for Marseilles is, as most people are aware, nearly an hour's drive from the Boulevard des Capucines.

There seemed to be a train at 11.10 p.m., arriving at Nice at 3.54, and another at 11.15 a.m., reaching its destination at 2.6, together with one at 8 p.m., which never got to Nice at all. The 11.15 in the morning

seemed to be the best, so I determined to dine comfortably, and go to the play for an hour or two, trying to forget Leonard and Muffin Boy and my £500.

Next morning I set off on my new journey, and on the afternoon of the following day we drew up at Nice, the exquisite views seen from the window of the train, as we followed the Mediterranean coast-line, almost compensating for the trouble and annoyance. And now, how to find Leonard? The villa which his uncle, the Earl of Horchester, had occupied during a former winter was up at Cimiez I knew, so thither I drove. No! That villa was taken by an Italian family. Down the hill again, and round to some score of the hotels which are so plentiful. Neither Kraft nor Chauvain know M. Leonard, and at the Hôtels des Anglais, d'Angleterre, de France, de la Grand Bretagne, Méditerranée, and the rest, I have no better luck. He is not at the theatre, and I go to bed at last, tired and angry, wondering whether he will turn up next day, and trying to think that he is certain to take a stroll in the Promenade des Anglais before breakfast.

But he does not. I walk and drive all over the town in vain, till at last, about half-past twelve, I meet little Fluterton, a friend and member of the Smoking Room, on the Promenade.

"Hullo!" he says; "you here, too?"

"Yes; arrived yesterday," I reply, and before I can begin my story he breaks in with,—

"Just been seeing Leonard off; he turned up yesterday."

"And he's gone?" I ask, my feelings not permitting me to say more.

"Yes. He only just came to choose between a couple of houses for his people this winter. I'm glad they're coming. He's off to England straight," Flutterton remarks.

Then I tell him my story; how I have been in hot pursuit since Monday evening, and now it is Friday morning; and I detail all the circumstances connected with the miserable Muffin Boy and my £500.

"What a lark!" he says, laughing heartily; and I don't like it.

"It may strike you as being extremely funny, but I can't see the humour of being dragged to all parts of Europe for the sake of finding that I'm sold when I get there," I observe somewhat severely.

"Yes, I know, my dear fellow, it is a bore, and I'm really very sorry; but it is so jolly absurd!" and he tries unsuccessfully to repress a chuckle. "However," he continues, "you can't go till the evening, so you'd better come and dine with us. We've got a house, you know, and Leonard stayed with us last night."

This accounted for my fruitless search through the hotels, then: but I forgave Flutterton for his want of sympathy, and was led off to pass the rest of the day with his mother and sisters, though I was in too great a state of excitement and irritation to thoroughly appreciate their amiable kindness; and by as early a train as possible I set off again on my chase. From Nice to

London is a far cry; but engines and energy can do much in these days, and within considerably less than forty-eight hours I was once more in London and on my way to Leonard's chambers. It would be very hard if he had again escaped me.

"Mr. Leonard returned?" I inquired of his man as he appeared at the door.

"Yes, sir, master's returned from abroad, but he has gone down to the country. Left last night, sir, for Horchester. He has been to Nice, sir, but only stayed——"

"Yes, I know; when will he be back?" I interrupted.

"Well, sir, it's uncertain, I think. I was not to forward letters or papers till I heard, sir," the man answered; and here was another source of perplexity.

The best thing to be done seemed to carry on the pursuit without flagging, however, especially as I was sure of a friendly welcome from my errant friend's uncle. There was a train at 7.10 in the morning, reaching Horchester at 10.30, and at any rate I might have the consolation of discussing the matter with Leonard. This was Monday, and the race was to be run next day. He must have put my £500 on the wretched Muffin Boy, who now figured in the quotations at 33 to 1, while 125 to 100 was the last recorded bet against King Pippin. As the train carried me down to Horchester I had the pleasure of reading the analyses of the prophets, most of whom went for the King in big letters, with the

reservation that the next three favourites might either of them win if anything happened to him, and that it would be well to keep some three or four others on the safe side, while danger might be apprehended from a couple of outsiders—of which Muffin Boy was not one. He was thrown over by all except one prophet, who declared that he was well in, and if he only retained his spring form might, despite the vicissitudes of the market, effect a surprise.

Horchester Towers, it need hardly be said, is situated some five miles from the railway. We reached the station about ten minutes late, but a groom in a dog-cart was luckily in waiting, come over to fetch a parcel, so I was spared an hour's journey in a damp and unpleasant fly. Mr. Leonard had arrived the night before, I learned from the groom, so at last my quarry seemed run to earth.

"Was Mr. Leonard in?" I inquired, on reaching the door.

"No, he was not. Had gone out with the gentlemen. Would I see my lord?" was the reply.

I would, and did.

"Yes. Herbert arrived last night. He has kindly been to Nice to look after a villa for us. His aunt wished him to choose the place himself, as agents give singularly flattering accounts of houses they wish to dispose of. The hounds meet to-day for the first time, you know—you may have seen—and he rode over to see them thrown off, at any rate," Lord Horchester answers.

"Won't he be back this afternoon?" I inquire.

"No; we couldn't persuade him to stay. They were going to draw towards Chorlington, and hounds are almost certain to run towards Hartlebury, so he will put up his horse and catch the train. He must be in town this evening, as he is going to Gloucester, I think he said, to-morrow," I am informed.

To Gloucester, no doubt, to see Muffin Boy take that expensive gallop.

"If you are so anxious to see him at once you had better get on a horse and try to catch them up. They only left some half-hour ago, and as it is the first morning there may be some delay. We shall be very glad to see you if you can come back, and, if not, leave your horse at either of the inns and he can be fetched with Herbert's," Lord Horchester kindly suggested, and I was glad to accept.

There was, of course, no time for boots or breeches, even if I could have borrowed anything of the sort, and as I have tried borrowed breeches on one occasion, I should not have been eager to repeat the experiment, incongruous and opposed to the unities as trousers may seem at a meet. Within seven minutes I had swallowed two glasses of peach brandy, made play with some sandwiches that happened to be at hand, and was on the back of a wiry little chestnut mare, galloping along the grass by the side of the road at a very respectable pace. The meet at the cross roads was a good six miles from the Towers, and in less than half an hour I

was wiping the perspiration from my forehead—the first few gallops, particularly on a pulling horse, try a man in rough condition—and looking round for the hounds. The trampled grass, some gaps in a fence, and a muddy track leading to the easiest way over it, gave unmistakable evidence that here they had been lately. It was twelve o'clock, and rather past, however, and where were they now?

“Hounds be gone down Chorlton Lane, sir,” a rustic grinned, seeing me standing up in the stirrups and gazing, around; so with a word of thanks to my informant, I started off again for Chorlinton. But though the hounds had been in that direction they had diverged. I soon lost the track, set off on a false scent, got hopelessly astray, and it was not until nearly three o'clock that I suddenly came across a straggler bound for home, and learning my direction from him, suddenly perceived the hunt before me, at the end of a long slip of cover, as I reached the top of a slight rise. Several of my friends were among the men, but no Leonard. To have found him would have seemed too much good luck considering what a vein of ill-fortune I was working through at the time; so, instead of asking where he was, I simply remarked that he was gone, of course?

“Yes,” cheerfully replied one of his cousins; “he left about a quarter of an hour ago. He's bound for town. Off racing to-morrow, I think he said.”

“That's just what I want to see him about particularly. Can I catch him, do you think? No, thanks,



"I CAN'T STAY; I WISH I COULD."

I can't stay ; I wish I could. I must see him. What station was he bound for ?" I ask.

"I hardly know. Did Herbs say where he was going ?" he inquired of his brother.

"No, I didn't hear him. You see there's not much to choose as regards distance. Hartlebury's nearer town, but we always put up at Chorlington when we can, and his old mare will be there all night, I expect."

"Then good-bye—sorry to go and leave you, but I must find him to-night," I said, and turning round started off towards a sign-post I had lately passed pointing to Chorlington. But here, for almost the first time in this eccentric chase, an idea struck me. Hartlebury was not much farther than Chorlington, and whether Leonard started from there or not, he would be obliged to pass through. It was now 3.30; the train left Chorlington at 4.3—this I had ascertained. It was eight miles from Chorlington to Hartlebury, and I was about three miles distant from each—in the centre of what was nearly a semi-circle. The best thing to do was clearly to make for Hartlebury, and wait till the train came up, and this I accordingly did, arriving at the latter station soon after 4, whereas the train could not be due till about 4.25.

I dismounted and sauntered into the station, where I found the amiable official who did duty as station-master.

"When is the next train for town ?" I asked, almost as a matter of form.

"Next train for town? 8.48, sir," he rejoined.

"8.48?" I exclaimed. "Is not there one just due? It can't have passed?"

"Ah, sir, that don't stop here now; the 4.2 from Chorlinton it was, but it runs through, this month."

"Are you sure?" I asked desperately, and the station-master smiled.

"Yes, sir, I'm sure enough. I've been here nigh upon ten years, and I know the run of the trains pretty well. It was took off last month," he rejoined.

There could be no doubt about it, and there was none. Punctual almost to a moment the train that was "took off" ran through, as I had been assured it would. Did I see Leonard in a carriage as it passed me? Speed was a little slackened, and a man standing up in one of the compartments looked just like the object of my irritating quest.

"Have you a telegraph office here?" I asked, for at any rate a telegram would reach him, and luckily there was a chance of sending; so to his private address and to each of the three clubs he frequented, including, of course, the Smoking Room, I dispatched a message, warning him against the deceptive Muffin Boy, and pointing to King Pippin as a comparatively certain winner. At least I should have shown him that I was not such a fool as I seemed, and he might by skilful manipulation save my money.

CHAPTER III.

THE telegrams sent off, it did not seem to matter much whether I went to town by the 8.48 or by some corresponding train from another station, or waited comfortably till next morning and dined at the Towers. I should have reached there too late to see Leonard that night in all probability, and I was rather angry with him, because of the erratic wanderings to which he had condemned me. They were in no wise his fault, but that did not make me any the less vexed with him; rather the more, perhaps. My telegrams contained all that I wanted to say, and however he dodged, as appeared to be his wont, he was sure to find one of the four that would be waiting his arrival. I returned, therefore, to the Towers, and for a brief period forgot the worry of the luckless bet in the comfort of a pleasant dinner. Though they lived in the saddle, most of the inhabitants of this delightful house, and though Lord Horchester had a few animals in training, they were far from being a racing community. Some one after dinner said he supposed the Gloucester Cup was a certainty for King Pippin, and some one else said, "Yes, you couldn't get money on at evens yesterday," and that was all. I did not advocate Muffin Boy's claims to consideration, bitterly hating his deleterious and indigestible name. With the second glass of Madeira after dinner it flashed across my mind that after all he might win, but the

reflective influence of a cigar assured me that I was in for a "real bad thing."

Next morning I was off at daybreak, and should have reached town before nine, but by one of those unlucky flukes which had been pursuing me for the week we suddenly pulled up at a lonely spot between two stations; something had gone off the line, or happened to a luggage-train before us, and for rather more than an hour we were delayed. The blessings showered on directors, engine-drivers, guards, pointsmen, navvies, engineers, &c., need not be repeated. Instead of arriving at a quarter to nine, it was twenty minutes past ten before Euston was reached, and twenty to eleven before I was at the door of Leonard's rooms on my hopeless errand. The special had started from Paddington at 10.15, and I had hoped to catch Leonard in good time for ten minutes' chat before he was off; now there was nothing for it but to drive to Victoria Street and see what had happened.

"Mr. Leonard has gone, I suppose?" I ask his man.

"Did not come home at all last night, sir. Went straight on, I presume, to Gloucester, sir. Races is on to-day."

"Yes, so I believe," I mildly answer. "Is there a telegram waiting for him?"

"Yes, sir. Came yesterday about half-past five. He wasn't here to receive it," he tells me; and with an inarticulate exclamation I retire to find out how a man

feels when he has paid £500 for the privilege of making an ass of himself.

In due course out came the evening papers.

Lord Russford's b.c. King Pippin	:	.	1
Mr. Jennings's Trouville	2
Sir W. Heseltine's Half Moon	3

And the journal further stated that it was won in a canter by half a dozen lengths.

That evening I was engaged to dine, and, happily, with some people who did not talk racing; but in the evening I strolled down to the Smoking Room. The usual cheery group was round the fire, and lounging in an easy-chair, a little away from the rest, reading the special *Standard* and quietly smoking, was the man I had been chasing so ardently—Herbert Leonard.

He looked up with perfect calmness, and quietly said, "Holloa? Good evening. How are you?"

"Well, my dear fellow, I may say that I am pretty well blown with pursuing you for the last six months, or what seems like it. I've been to Paris, Nice, to the Towers, to Chorlinton, and some dozen other vile holes, to say nothing of a score or two visits to your rooms," I tell him.

"And why all this exertion?" he coolly asks, with a look of innocent surprise on his face.

"Haven't you got my telegrams?" I ask in turn.

"Oh, yes, of course. I received it just now. Are there

any more? It was so late I didn't go home to dress, and came in to dine as I was."

"Any more? Isn't that enough? Have you been to Gloucester?" I inquire.

"Yes, just back. Went straight on from the Towers, changed my things in the train, I hate the worry of going racing from town early in the morning. It was all right," he rejoins.

"All right? What was? Backing a brute that wasn't even started to win? I don't blame you, my dear fellow, but it looks to me all wrong," I answer.

"All wrong? How do you mean?" he asks in surprise.

"Why, didn't you back Muffin Boy for me?"

"Certainly not! Didn't you receive my letter?"

"Letter? What letter?"

"A letter I wrote you ten days ago, telling you about it," he answers.

"My dear fellow, you astound me. I have received no letter at all. What was it about? Are you sure you sent it?"

"I'm sure I put it in the box, and it must have gone."

"In the box? In what box?" I inquire.

"Why, the letter-box here," he replies; and just then a waiter passes.

"You are careful to send the letters every night, are you not?" Leonard asks.

"Yes, sir. They go every night at half-past two," the man replies.

"Then it could not have been correctly addressed. Where did you send it to?" I ask.

"Your rooms, and it was correctly addressed, I'm sure, for I looked carefully," he says.

"How do you mean looked? Did not you address it yourself?" I ask again.

"It just happens I did not. The writing-table was full, so I scribbled a line in pencil, and as no fellow moved, I asked Harquier, who was at the table, to write an envelope to you. I'm certain he did so, for I read it over to see if it was all right," he goes on.

A light dawns upon me as he continues:—

"I told you I had heard that Muffin Boy wasn't going, and that I had got you 2 to 1 against King Pippin. I couldn't do better, and had to look round to get that."

The light becomes more and more vivid.

Slowly I draw from my pocket Harquier's letter, the epistle which, as recorded at the end of the first chapter, I had put unopened into my pocket, believing that it was simply to say that he could not come to dine with me.

"That's the letter!" Leonard cries, and opening it I read, in pencil, "Muffin Boy all wrong. I have put your money on King Pippin. Got you 2 to 1."

Afterwards I heard that Harquier had sent his own communication to me at another club, the one where I had asked him to dine.

With Leonard's letter in my pocket the whole time, answering so conclusively the query I was anxious to

put to him, I had followed him in this long journey. Carefully and steadfastly carrying about with me the information I sought, I had chased him from his rooms to Paris, to Nice, back to London, to Horchester Towers, to his rooms, and to the club. Had I only not jumped at conclusions, and had I opened the letter and read the two lines and a half he had written, I should have saved all the worry of what I think may be correctly called AN ECCENTRIC CHASE.



